



Communicate to be understood

Recently promoted to a managerial position, Peter gathers his team together to present his strategy. After briefly summarizing the situation, he outlines what he hopes to achieve, i.e., greater management discipline, more dynamic sales initiatives, and tighter collaboration with R&D to ensure that innovations are aligned with customer needs. He has carefully prepared his presentation. People listen attentively and ask two or three clarification questions, which Peter answers easily. The meeting then naturally moves on to other operational matters.

Several common traps frequently cause misunderstandings.

After the meeting, the comments fly. Is there behind Peter's account of the situation a criticism of the way the team has always done things until now? What does he really intend with all of these changes? What if his real objective were to pave the way for redundancies? Etc. While Peter leaves the meeting with the impression that he presented his priori-

ties clearly, people are convinced that he is hiding his true motives.

This type of situation occurs frequently in the business world. Indeed, **certain psychological biases prevent people from being perfectly open with one another.** In this particular example, Peter made three classic mistakes:

Lack of lucidity

Peter **based his message on his perception of the situation**, built upon a series of interviews with his subordinates, superiors and peers. Certainly, this approach would appear quite reasonable! However, he forgot that his perception was in large part subjective – a coherent story reconstituted from the facts available to him. For example, when he heard complaints about management discipline, he concluded that everyone would be glad to see improvements in this area. This type of reaction is natural. Indeed, when faced with incomplete information, the human brain naturally “fills in the gaps” to give meaning to our perceptions and to help us move forward despite uncertainty. However, we must keep in mind at all times that **our perceptions are assumptions and not objective facts.**

Lack of clarity

To avoid upsetting the team, Peter summed up the situation very briefly, despite feeling that there were significant gray zones that needed to be cleared up. He preferred to state his conclusions as wishes, deciding that using expressions such as “more dynamic sales initiatives” and “greater discipline” would be less confrontational than saying that he felt the situation was dysfunctional. However, **by toning down his message, he made it less clear.** What did he *really* think of the situation? People couldn't be sure. And, when human beings lack information, they tend to assume the worst, hence the alarmist interpretations that would catch Peter completely by surprise!

Lack of attentiveness

Focused on delivering the message he had prepared, Peter **forgot to listen to his audience.** Certainly, he left time for questions and answered those that were asked. But he did not attempt to dig deeper by helping his subordinates discuss their reactions and share their feelings. As a result, he had no way to know whether or not his message had been understood.

The quality of communication depends on three key behaviors

- 1 Understand the importance of interpretation
- 2 Dare to express yourself explicitly
- 3 Make sure your message has been understood

First key driver

Understand the importance of interpretation

Ask yourself

To distinguish between facts and interpretations, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Observations**
What have you observed that is factual and indisputable? Has the counterpart observed the same thing?
- **Feelings**
What feelings did you have at the time (e.g., knot in the stomach, excitement, anxiety, etc.)? Could these sensations and the associated feelings have influenced how you interpreted the situation?
- **Thoughts**
What thoughts crossed your mind? What did they reveal about your emotions? Could these thoughts have been exaggerated or unfounded?
- **Desires**
How would you like this situation to unfold? Are you mistaking your hopes for reality? Conversely, what do you fear? Could this be causing you to overestimate the risks?

Based on *Clear Leadership*, Gervase Bushe, Intercultural Press, 2009.

Clear communication requires great lucidity. Indeed, an individual's perception of a given situation is based not only on objective facts, but also and especially on the meaning he or she lends to those facts. Furthermore, people interpret things in different ways, depending on their personality, past experiences, emotions, desires, etc. A highly successful senior manager who is optimistic by nature may easily see the potential of a new partnership, whereas an overworked employee who has just struggled through a similar situation will tend to focus on the risks. If the manager does not recognize this difference in perspective, he stands little chance of conveying his message, because he will fail to address what is most important in the eyes of his counterpart.

Recognizing the subjective nature of the perception of any situation is thus critical. This requires developing three reflexes in particular:

- **Keep in mind that differences in perception are legitimate.** We tend to think that our own viewpoint is reasonable – because we have given it a lot of thought – and that other

perspectives are less so. If we realize that our point of view is founded largely on subjective interpretation, we can more easily take other views into account, e.g.: *"My understanding of the situation is... And how do you see things?"*

- **Distinguish between fact and interpretation.** Our credibility is reinforced when we acknowledge that some dimensions of our message are debatable. For example,

"I have noticed that sales are dropping (fact). We have also had some internal organization issues (fact). It seems to me that the two may be linked (interpretation)."

Successful conversations depend less on what is said than on how it is interpreted.

- **Learn to identify "mental models."** As we go through life, we build simplified models to understand our environment. For example, *"If I increase sales in my area of the business, I will be seen as competent."* Now, although these models are useful, they are not always applicable and are certainly not universal. What if your new boss thinks that margins are more important than volume? Being conscious of these simplified models is indispensable to explain them and test their validity.

Become aware of your interpretations: A useful exercise

Chris Argyris recommends a very simple exercise to become aware of the impact of more or less conscious thoughts on how we interpret situations. In two columns, write down what was really said during a conversation and what you were thinking at the time. This analysis can be highly instructive!

 ACTUAL CONVERSATION	 UNEXPRESSED THOUGHTS	 EXAMPLES OF POTENTIAL INSIGHTS
"Thank you for your question."	"What has he still not understood?" "His question is a way of saying he doesn't agree. I hope he doesn't drag everyone else along the same path!"	I'm annoyed, so I must be careful to avoid jumping to conclusions too quickly.
"There are some positive points here."	"This is a disaster! How could they have let things get this bad?"	I must be careful, because incompetency may not be the only cause.
"We should be ambitious on sales next year."	"How are they going to take this objective? Am I sapping their morale?"	I expect people to react negatively, so I must be careful not to misinterpret their reactions.
"I lack the resources to carry out this project."	"He's out to get me!"	I must be careful not to assume that the counterpart is purposely trying to destabilize me.

Based on *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Chris Argyris, Allyn and Bacon, 1990.

Second key driver

Dare to **express yourself explicitly**

Many misunderstandings are caused by what is left unsaid or by ambiguous messages that are interpreted incorrectly. Indeed, when we are uncomfortable in a given situation, we tend to tone down our communication. However, rather than reassuring our counterparts, this attitude tends to put them on their guard.

To the contrary, it is a better idea to **resort to explicit language**, particularly in tricky situations:

- **Choose simple and direct terms.**

Different people interpret the same words differently. The more abstract the terms used, the greater this risk becomes. For example, speaking of “performance” or “making an effort” is more subject to interpretation than speaking of “revenues” or “stepping up the pace of work.” People may hesitate to speak concretely for fear of sounding cruel, at the very real risk of being misunderstood.

- **Use affirming and personalized language.** Two frequent verbal tics tend to make communication unclear. Some people prefer to express messages as questions (“Do you think

we can continue at this rate?”), which leaves room for doubt as to what they really think. Questions are best left to the listening phases of the conversation. Other people like to use impersonal or passive forms of speech to create an impression of objectivity. For instance, “*I have trouble raising this subject with him,*” is a more accurate description of the situation than “*It is difficult to raise this subject with him.*” Forcing yourself to speak in the first person is a good way to make your meaning clear.

- **Clarify your feelings.** Some people

feel that they should hide their emotions. Yet, feelings are real, and dissimulating them only masks the true situation. The challenge

is to learn to talk about feelings without letting them degrade the quality of the conversation. Explaining, “*I am anxious about raising this subject with so-and-so,*” is a legitimate message that can help the counterpart understand the situation better, and prevents him or her from thinking that we haven’t raised the subject because we don’t care about it!

Messages are perceived based more on *how* things are said than on *what* is said.

Remember

- Choose **simple, concrete terms** and avoid generalizations and abstractions.
- Express yourself **directly, in short sentences**; don’t blur the meaning by cloaking the message in too many nuances or asides.
- Speak in the **active**, rather than the passive, voice.
- Use the **first person singular** rather than impersonal forms, like “one” or “they.”
- Use **affirmations**, rather than questions.
- Talk about your **feelings** as a factor to take into account, rather than trying to dissimulate them.
- Speak in **neutral** terms and avoid judgmental or accusatory statements.

Speak directly without upsetting your counterparts

The way a message is perceived is affected more by how it is expressed than what is actually said. You must follow three golden rules to get your message accepted:

KEEP THE MESSAGE CLEAR

Choose words that convey the message clearly. Don’t sugarcoat your message to the point where it cannot be understood out of context. Even difficult messages should be stated clearly as a first step in ensuring they are understood.

ADOPT A NEUTRAL TONE

Adopt a non-judgmental tone of voice. Learn to control your non-verbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice, pace of speech, etc.) to ensure that the message is conveyed by your words, which are less subject to interpretation than non-verbal cues.

USE MODERATE EXPRESSIONS

Avoid using aggressive terms. There are always several ways of saying the same thing. Without blurring your meaning, express your message in a way that is less likely to upset or provoke your counterpart.

Based on **Failure to Communicate**, Holly Weeks, Harvard Business Press, 2008.

Third key driver

Make sure **your message has been understood**

Helpful hints

To communicate effectively, try to focus on the positive aspects of the counterpart's position:

- **Start from the principle that he or she is well intended.** At best, this is true and you will have paved the way for a constructive conversation. At worst, it isn't true; but what do you have to lose by listening?
- **Deliberately put yourself in a positive state of mind.** Thinking of all the good things that have happened in the course of the day will help you serenely deal with the frustration caused by a misunderstanding.
- **Break down the counterpart's position to accentuate the positive.** Even when people flagrantly misunderstand one another, common ground can still be found around certain aspects.

Focused on what we want to say, we tend to assume that our message will at least be understood, if not accepted. Yet, this is far from being the norm.

To communicate effectively, you must listen to your audience so that you can respond and adapt your delivery according to how your message is received. This requires a proactive approach:

- **Ask the counterpart what he or she has understood and feels.** During a conversation, people often believe they have understood a message only to discover later that something completely different was meant. When we are delivering a message, we are responsible for helping the counterpart identify such comprehension errors. We must therefore listen actively by asking the counterpart to not only reformulate what he or she has understood, but also express his or her feelings and corresponding conclusions or interpretations. This

Stating your message is not enough; you must make sure you have been heard.

approach is indispensable to uncover misunderstandings.

- **Control your reactions.** When you are trying to convey a message, hearing that you have not been understood is never enjoyable. Yet, if you let your irritation show, the counterpart is likely to clam up or even become aggressive! To listen to the counterpart effectively, you must

learn to defer your reactions until your emotions have subsided. This type of self-control is essential to avoid disrupting the flow of the

conversation with an inopportune reaction.

- **Respect the counterpart's point of view.** People are often uncomfortable saying they don't agree or don't understand. You must thus do everything possible to help them openly express their reaction to your words. Only by making this effort can you identify potential misunderstandings and adapt your message to arrive at a shared understanding.

Some active listening techniques

OBSERVE	Pay attention to the counterpart's body language, looks and expressions, changes in tone or pace of speech, breathing, etc. Do they indicate a feeling of discomfort?
ASK QUESTIONS	Ask the counterpart to rephrase what he or she has understood from what you have said. Ask the counterpart about his or her feelings, and how he or she interprets the situation. Seek the meaning behind the words, and ask the counterpart directly in case of doubt. Don't dwell on any particular point, but cover the entire message.
REPHRASE	Translate the counterpart's message into your own words to encourage him or her to react if need be. Don't always wait for the counterpart to finish before rephrasing; if the content of the message is complex, it is better to make sure you understand as you go along.
VALIDATE	Verify that the counterpart feels understood. Verify that the counterpart has said everything he or she has to say. Verify that you have arrived at a shared understanding of your message.