

sección especial
en idioma inglés

the essence of understanding

E. T. EGGERS

Profesor of Management at Georgia
State University

About two decades ago Alvin Dodd, former President of the American Management Association, said that the most important problem in American industry was poor and inadequate communication. It is still the most important problem. In fact, it may well be the most important problem facing society and societies. Ineffectual communication probably accounts for most of the misunderstandings among major and minor group within our society and among nations throughout the world. The great Disraeli is reputed to have said, "Whatever can be misunderstood, will be misunderstood."

The issue is one of such great magnitude and of such complexity that countless books and articles are constantly pouring from the presses in a seemingly futile effort to aid in the solution of the problem. Most managers in all types of organizations and at all levels of management will list communications as one of their major difficulties. Results of research dealing with the work of executives indicate that as much as 80% of an executive's time is spent in the communicating process. Most of this time is spent in oral communications: however, a great deal of additional time is spent in reading and writing various



reports and other media. The very essence of the manager's work is communicating.

The significance of the problem is better understood when one considers the many dimensions of communications. For example, the manager must not overlook the importance of the art and skill of the communicating process. Effective written communications and oral communications—such as public speeches outside the formal organization—are of vital concern. Of course, the manager must also be aware of the problems arising from the interactions of the informal groups within the firm—the rumors and the familiar “grapevine.” In addition, there is the task of the selection and use of available communication media. Finally, the organization is faced with the everpresent problem of public relations, the very heart of which is communications. It is no wonder, then, that the issue occupies such an important place in the literature and the thinking of today's manager.

The overall purpose of communications is to convey some sort of message and to obtain some type of result. The result desired may be better employee motivation, or it may be simply to keep everyone informed because people “like to know.” It must be remembered that communication among members of management is just as vital as between managers and operative workers even though the latter is almost always stressed. The manager must “know” before he can make intelligent decisions and communicate those decisions to others. And since the manager's influence is greater than that of an operative employee, it may be argued that adequate communications among managers is even more important than between managers and workers.

There are far too many complexities involved in this enigma to even touch on here. However, a few of the complications can be mentioned briefly.

Clear-Cut Objectives

Important problems often arise because

these are not present. And this is true regardless of whether or not the communication is verbal or nonverbal. A letter, a report, a speech, a memorandum to employees, an interview, even a corrective or informative talk with another person in the organization should have a definite purpose or purposes before the communicating process begins. Thus, the communicator can always gear what he says or writes toward the intended objectives.

In like manner, the sender of the message should always consider the recipients.

Intended Recipients

Our communications can be far more effective if we will keep in mind the type of individuals to whom we are directing our communications. A primary value of stressing the behavioral approach to management is that one can communicate better if he understands the human characteristics of the recipients. Temperaments vary and personality clashes may be avoided if the sender of the message practices a little empathy. Furthermore, one may more readily avoid the age-old trap of turning from the issues involved to the personalities implicated, thus obscuring the points in question even more.

Reluctance to Communicate

But no matter how much the need to communicate is stressed, there are many managers and nonmanagers who simply won't. This unwillingness to try harder to convey a message or to understand what is being communicated may arise from a multitude of factors. For example, the receiver may be so involved in contemplating his answer that he fails to really hear what is being said or understand what he is reading. Emotions may get in the way, and he is suddenly so much on the defensive that his attention to the message is impaired. Again, personalities may intrude. If either party in the communicating process dislikes the other, or if it so happens



that the reverse is true and they particularly like each other, the transmittal of the message will be affected.

Unfortunately, the manager is often just as reluctant to communicate as anyone else. His self-interest and his own self-image may be at stake. This may partially account for the fact that so many written business communications are stereotyped and composed in such a stiff, formal, and unrealistic style. The executive feels that he must continue to convey the impression that he has superior knowledge and ability.

Another difficulty often present in this lack of desire to communicate is simply the attitude of the participants, an attitude that is characterized by reluctance to change. Few people want to admit they are wrong or incorrect in their thinking or opinions. Thus it is tough to see the other person's point of view. One is reminded of the little poem whose author seems to be lost to antiquity:

When it comes to arguments,

My conception's very fine.

I always see both sides of the question;

The one that's wrong and mine.

It bears repeating that communication requires both a sender and a receiver, and the message that is sent must be the same that is received. Otherwise, communication does not take place. Participants must listen as well as speak.

Language and Vocabulary

However, a problem of the listener may have to do with semantics—which is the very heart of communications. The “quality” of the message is determined by the appropriate use of signs and symbols, facial expressions, body movements, voice tones, and so on. Mutual understanding and interpretation of

symbols and the logic involved is essential. Even one word can be stressed or accented to convey different meanings. Simplicity that induces logic is usually the keystone.

The speaker or writer must also beware of using a specialized language or vocabulary. Not everyone speaks the same “language” the lawyer, the accountant, the technical engineer, the doctor—each has his own lingo, with people outside the profession may not understand. The communicator should try to frame his message in the language that will convey the precise ideas he has in mind and in language that his listeners will understand to mean precisely that.

Organizational Levels

Different symbols may be employed to transmit the same message because of the communication's barriers among organizational levels. If the organization is large with many levels of managers and with diverse functions, the communications gap becomes a problem of considerable magnitude. There is, first, the distance that exists between the top policy makers and the lower levels of managers and employees who are expected to carry out the policies. The status relationships among those levels as well as the educational and experience differences add to this problem. The message first formed at the top of the organizational structure may have to be translated into understandable language at each level down the line. The same is true of communications going up the line. Even though the executive is usually very verbal in advocating two- or three-way communications within his organization, one sometimes wonders if the really expects it or even wants it!

Another type of problem concerns communications between member's of line and staff. A primary function of most staff departments is that of passing on advice, suggestions, results of research, and so on, to the line functions. The problem may be enhanced because:



the staff man does not have authority to enforce any line action; the staff man may be considered to be a "technical specialist" who really doesn't see the "big picture," and thus does not enjoy the respect of the line man; the line man is jealous of the staff man; and so on.

The Communication Media

One of the reasons for the existence of the problem just cited, as well as for other types of communications problems, is that all too often the communication is confused with the media. They are by no means the same. The manager may feel that once he has issued a memorandum, a report or a letter, he has communicated. As a matter of fact, he may only have *used a medium*, and no actual communications has taken place. The illusion thus created may remain until unfortunate results occur.

A Concluding Remark

The majority of research and writing on the subject of communications appears to

concern itself with the various methods and techniques of the communications process. Perhaps the basic attack should also include emphasis on the personal attributes of the persons who are communicating. The basic wants, likes and dislikes, the morale and attitudes, and other qualities pertaining to the temperaments of the individuals should be given more consideration if *effective* communications are to be obtained.

Effective communications can occur only when the communicator is constantly aware of the desired purposes or goals; and his message must be targeted toward the right area of the listener's thinking. The listener must *understand* what is being communicated, he must be willing and able to *accept* it, and he must be evoked to *respond* in the preferred manner.

Managers at all levels within the organizational structure should well remember that communications is their primary device. It is their one essential means of directing the efforts of other people to produce satisfactory work and achieve desired objectives.

