



THE LAWS OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is such a basic human and instinctive process, right? It does not need to be a complicated concept and it needs not have some incredible mystery around it. It is easy to understand any message since there is always one meaning in whichever message people put out there. This therefore means that when one studies communication, you are studying how people relate to each other, to their cliques, groups, organizations, communities, villages, influencing each other, being influenced, informing and being informed, teaching and being taught, entertaining and being entertained by using shared signs and symbols.

Not really! Communication is indeed a human process and it is important to know that understanding the human communication process means understanding how people relate to each other. This process is not necessarily simple. Communication has essential rules which govern the ins and outs of the concept. These laws lie in the specific principles and barriers necessary for successful and effective communication. Whether a father is having a conversation with his teenage daughter, a church leader is giving special announcements during regular Sunday service, a young man is winking at his girlfriend, a telecom company is advertising on mass media platforms, a bank is discussing their products to market women at a typical Ghanaian market, or a baby is crying, these principles and barriers of communication apply.

The communication model is said to be made up of an information source or the sender of that message, the message itself, the channel through which the message will be sent, and the receiver of the information. In addition to these, Wilbur Schramm, a forefather in the development of a communication model explained that communication must be a two-way process where a sender of a message and the receiver of that message operate within the contexts of their respective frames of reference, their relationship and the social situation they find themselves in.

If communication is going to be reciprocal, it is important that information exchanged during the process of communication must inform, instruct, motivate and persuade.

This process must also be based on some signs and symbols whose meaning is understood by both the sender and the receiver. Also, the communication will be predicated on the relationship between them as well as their social contexts. The initial process of informing comprises attracting attention to the communication, achieving acceptance of the message, having it interpreted as intended, and getting the message stored for later use. If communication seeks to instruct, one must go a step further to stimulate active learning and practice. In the same way, if persuasion is the goal of communication, one must go beyond learning and practice to ensure acceptance of the message. This means the receiver must yield to the wishes or point of view of the sender. Evidently, barriers in achieving communication will increase with the goals of instruction and persuasion. Whether the objective of communication is to inform, instruct and/or persuade, the elements which make up the communication model remain the same. Let us break down these elements found in the communication model so we can appreciate their effect on the process and the intricacies therein.

The Sender

The sender in the communication model, who is usually the initiator of the communication process, is the person or source that is providing the message or the information. A sender could be an individual, an organization, a body, among others. Research has shown that the characteristics of a sender affect the initial acceptance of the message sent. This however does not necessarily have much effect on the long term impact of the message. For instance, first time mothers are more likely to accept as believable the message from an Ad on a new baby product if the source was a known, highly credible and trusted brand. This inclination may be enhanced if the product has been endorsed with a certified stamp from a recognized and respected health body, than if a friend mentioned it. However, after a few weeks, recipients of this message on the baby product are likely to retain about the same amount of information whether they got it from a credible source or from a friend.

This means a source's characteristics affect the communication process and impacts on receivers. The source's credibility or perceived credibility magnifies the worth of the information or the message sent. Credibility is usually seen in the status, reliability and expertise of the source. This doesn't necessarily mean information from less credible

sources do not impact on receivers. Impact from senders will vary from location to location, subject to subject, and from time to time.

The Message

The characteristics in message definitely have an impact in the communication process. However, the meaning of the message lies mainly within the receivers rather than the words used in the message. This means different people receiving the same message will interpret it differently, read different meanings into it and react to it differently. This reiterates the point earlier made that communication must be based on shared meaning. Even so, message characteristics can have powerful effects even if it does not necessarily conform to some shared understanding. Since the receiver is the interpreter of a message, it is quite difficult to have straight jacket rules that govern all communication conditions. However, research has provided some guidelines communicators can use in their work. For instance, if one seeks to persuade people using some form of communication, it is essential to determine if the message should contain only one side of the issue or both sides of the argument. Journalism rules will tell you that it is always important to raise both sides of an issue to help the reader or listener understand what actually happened. If you are a public relations person or an advertiser, two sides of a point might mean washing your dirty linen in public or giving your competitor an advantage over you. However, it is recommended that if the receivers of one's message oppose your position, present arguments on both sides of the issue. However, if they already agree with your position, your message will have greater impact if you present only arguments consistent with the receivers' views, in which case you are reinforcing their belief. It is also important that if you use messages containing both sides of an argument, do not leave out relevant arguments on the opposing side, or receivers who notice the omission will grow suspicious of your presentation. Finally, if your receivers are likely to be exposed later to persuasive messages countering your position, use two-sided messages to more or less 'immunize' the audience to build resistance to the later messages. There are other accepted 'rules' when the message seeks to make receivers comply, remember or take a specific action. We will discuss those at another time.

The Medium or Channel

How are you sending the message to the receiver? Choosing the right medium is such an essential law in communication. Your chosen medium can either help you reach the target receiver or divert your message to a totally different place, leaving it redundant and without impact. From the days of telegrams, faxes, post systems, to the use of radio, television and later the internet, technological advancement has definitely and overwhelmingly provided several options these days when it comes to delivering messages. In the 90s, corporate organizations felt the internet, especially the email system, was just fantastic in delivering messages. Now, the wonders of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flipboard, among others are simply amazing! These media are facilitating citizen journalism, low-cost advertising, simpler public relations campaign, and making the ability to send out just about anything possible. However, social media is definitely not for every communication effort.

Communication scholars still consider face-to-face interpersonal communication as the most direct, powerful, and preferred method for exchanging information. Unlike mass communication, interpersonal communication can involve as few as two people, usually close to each other, making use of many senses and providing the platform for immediate feedback. However, interpersonal communication is limited to a few people and messages which are targeted at many people would need to use a mass medium such as printed publications, radio, electronic newsletters, outdoor advertising and several others. Choosing the right medium or media requires an understanding of media and media effects, which is also another topic for another day.

The Receivers

One of the misconceptions this article seeks to erase is that receivers are passive recipients of information. If that were so, the law of communication would not include them in the model and communication would only be one-way. The receivers make communication a two-way process. For instance, children from different backgrounds and with different personalities will not react uniformly to a horror movie. Also, one message cannot influence everyone in the same way or cause all of them to make an attitudinal change homogeneously. For example, Asante Kotoko Football Club members who value group membership are relatively unaffected by messages championing positions counter to that of their team. People who are persistently aggressive towards

others tend to be resistant to persuasive messages. On the other hand, receivers' with low self-esteem and feelings of social inadequacy are influenced more by persuasive messages than people with high self-esteem and feelings of indifference towards others.

This understanding of how different receivers are is critical to every communicator. Communicators must therefore be conscious of who is receiving the message, how they are likely to receive it and how they are likely to respond to it. These receivers' laws can help a communicator design the right message through the right channel purposely for a receiver and not have overblown expectations from receivers. In the words of an ace communicator, Brenda Dervin, "Since audiences are known to be evasive at best and recalcitrant at worst, every effort is made to communicate artfully and well. While communication is conceptualized as a one-way flow, efforts are directed at targeting messages for different audience segments and promoting audience involvement wherever possible".

Context of the Relationship

Communication occurs within the context of the communicators' relationship. There are different ranges of relationships. From more close and intimate ones such as friendships and marriage, to formal, competitive and even conflictual ones. The fact is relationships affect communication. This is why organizations must be conscious of building mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders so that their communication with them will be more effective and efficient. Nowadays, it is not enough to advertise a brand and expect people to fall in love with you. Public relations, when done professionally, can definitely support individuals and organizations build good relationships with their friends, clients, competitors and sometimes 'haters'. Conflict, for instance, always provides a complicated context for communication. It is not for nothing that mining companies are very interested in community relations. Conflict can destroy any effort at effective communication and it is important to solve issues and build good and positive relationships. Again, when an organization has good relations with the media, it is more likely a journalist will approach you for your side of a damning story than if journalists feel disrespected by your organization. Yet again, if your employees feel unappreciated and uncared for, your organizations' newsletter will likely become 'white elephants' on their desks and communication will not be effective.

Communication in relationships helps the parties make predictions about others in the relationship. Communication reduces uncertainty about the probable outcomes of future exchanges and provides a basis for the continuing relationship. Understanding the communication laws, however, require not only an understanding of the relationship between the communicators but also the larger social context within which the communication occurs.

The Social Context

The social setting in which communication takes place affects its impact and effectiveness. Social settings include families, ethnic groups, organizations, associations, among others. Communication in groups depends on the nature and belief system of the group. Groups could be formal or informal, and some may be task-oriented or experiential groups. As a communicator, one must assess the group members' characteristics, the group size, group structure, group cohesiveness, and group purpose, group culture, among other traits, so you can design appropriate messages, choose appropriate channels and build appropriate relationships for effective communication. We should know that the values and norms of the larger society affect how all communicators, whether individuals or organizations, approach their stakeholders. This understanding of the social context should then shape the content of our messages, define our communication goals and condition receiver responses.

In conclusion, communication results from a multifaceted mutual process in which communicators try to inform, instruct or persuade within the contexts of their relationships and the larger social setting they find themselves. If communicators are to be successful, they must research and understand these complexities in communication so they are better informed on their communication strategies.