

COMMUNICATE, CAPTIVATE, CULTIVATE

4 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE MESSAGING

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At some point in our careers, we've all most likely experienced the "Telephone Game" as part of a team building exercise to improve communication. One person starts by whispering a message into a colleague's ear, who then whispers it into another's ear, and so on until the last person in the group is asked to announce the actual message. Almost always, the original message becomes so contorted along the way that it is hardly recognizable at the end, causing a good laugh among the participants. But while funny, there are real lessons to be learned from this simple game. Clearly, this is not a good process if the goal is effective messaging.

When considering how to improve messaging skills, first think about what's going on in your environment. Communication effectiveness in a stable environment is much different from a new or evolving one.

1. Does your organization have a culture of effective messaging?

It's not unusual for messaging and communications concepts to show up in the "needs improvement" category in organizational surveys. If your organization has a history of surveying the workforce, you've likely seen evidence of this. Even organizations which are conscientious about their messaging can often find room for improvement. But if you are hearing things like what's on the list below of common excuses for not communicating, it might signal the difference between needing improvement and needing an overhaul!



- "They don't need to know yet. We'll tell them when the time comes."
- "They already know. We announced it."
- "I told the supervisors. It's their job to tell the rank and file."
- "We don't know the details ourselves, so there's no point in saying anything until everything has been decided."

It's hard to do much about improving messaging and communications when you don't understand the current environment. If you don't presently have a means of gauging communication quality, think about introducing one. Most organizations use surveys but focus groups can also work to assess the health of your messaging strategy. At a minimum, take some time at a periodic staff meeting and ask the question, "how effective are we in messaging and communications?" When having these discussions, don't forget to examine how clear the organization is regarding its fundamental business goals and objectives. Lack of clarity regarding business fundamentals can be a natural barrier to effective messaging.

2. How does your organization manage message quality and delivery?

It's hard to "captivate and cultivate" an audience when the message is not relevant. Some experts estimate that 80% of all internal communication via meetings, teleconferences, presentations, emails, etc. consists of sharing information that does not require action and/or communicates something for which there is no discernible consequence if the recipient ignores it. For just email alone, The Radicati Group, a technology research firm estimates that individuals receive about 125 business emails per day, and they predict this number will grow by at least four percent annually going forward. Even if all emails are critically relevant, its difficult to focus on this quantity along with everything else that needs to be done during the day.

Consider also, that people remember: 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 70% of what they see and hear. As such, some information will require more than one delivery method.

One way to improve your efforts is to consider which one of the following four categories the message fits. The category with the best fit helps to determine the level of effort required for effective messaging.

- **Simple/Informational**, e.g., Holiday party announcement.
- **Simple/Directional**, e.g., the Monday staff meeting is moved to Tuesday.
- **Complex/Informational**, e.g., Health care open season.
- **Complex/Directional**, e.g., project plan with roles and responsibilities.

Once you've selected the category, a key process to apply in developing delivery strategies is:

Simple/ Informational	Simple/ Directional
Complex/ Informational	Complex/ Directional

Once you've selected the category, a key process to apply in developing delivery strategies is:



The Audience are those who are on the receiving end of the communication. Keep in mind the Audience is not always monolithic. Many Integrated Product Teams (IPTs) consist of a core group who's ongoing information needs may be more extensive than others who are subject matter experts or are there for a specific reason at some future point in the project lifecycle. Putting the IPT members in various relationship categories allows more tailoring of the messaging strategy.

The Purpose can be considered as the intent or goal of the communication which can vary depending on the audience. When thinking about the communication's purpose, consider what message you wish the recipient to take away.

Once consideration is whether or not the communication is strategic or tactical. That understanding helps with the type of content to cover as follows.

Strategic	Tactical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The problem to be fixed • Where we are so far • Successes so far • The outcome we want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The problem to be fixed • How it affects us • What exactly needs to be done • How will success be measured and what are the consequences of failure • What support is available • What's in it for us as individuals and a group

The Design not only includes the type of content, but also the delivery method(s), e.g. email, PowerPoint presentation, memorandum, All Hands, and other types of meetings including One-on-Ones. Topics that fall into one of the Complex categories will likely require multiple types of delivery methods and frequently delivered.

A full understanding of Audience and Purpose first, makes it easier to design a level of effort whether it is a one-time communication or more complex iterations over time.

3. When messaging, does your organization address concepts associated with “filtering”?

In addition to the more objective issues raised in questions one and two, there is the concept of Filtering to consider. We all do it and it affects how we process information received. Examples of Filtering include:

- **Selective Exposure**, what you choose to see.
- **Selective Perception**, what you choose to believe.
- **Selective Comprehension**, what you choose to understand.
- **Selective Retention**, what you choose to remember.

There are many factors which drive how and why we Filter. Some factors are as simple as the extent we care and/or are engaged in the ins and outs of the message being delivered. We can all relate to surfing cable television, when there’s no immediate interest, CLICK! We do the same thing at work. Addressing concepts outlined in the above response to questions one and two can help mitigate Filtering related to this particular factor.

Other factors involve our unique personalities which can impact how we look at, and relate to, information in terms of importance and value. Those of us familiar with personality type definitions such as the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Dominance (D), Influence (I), Steadiness (S), and Conscientiousness (C) assessment (DISC) understand that we all receive and interpret information differently.

Finally, a new Filtering factor relates to the way we’ve worked for the past few years. The COVID Pandemic has spawned a new work at home environment reliant on technology. The jury is still out on a full understanding of this new hybrid work approach. On some levels, productivity appears as good or better and many people certainly like the change. On the other hand, recent studies by Microsoft suggest that the quality of communication degrades when virtual meetings are back to back without breaks. Turns out it’s a neurological matter. The brain needs some downtime to fully absorb information received.

Moreover, the reduction of face to face meetings presents other challenges to ensuring effective messaging. When meetings are face-to-face, it’s easier to expect participant behavior to follow a different etiquette. For example, smart phones go into airplane mode and may have to stay in pockets. Likewise, there are not multiple computer screens in front of the participant screaming for multi-tasking during the meeting. A major benefit of face-to-face meetings is the presenter can see the body language of the participants. Some research suggests that 55% of measuring communication effectiveness comes from the participant’s body language during a meeting. If you are delivering virtually, and the meeting’s ground rules allow users to shut off their video, the risk of less effective communication goes up, as you can no longer see the level of engagement, and thus risking the focus of the meeting.

All of these factors makes the job of those who are on the delivery side of sending information today more challenging, especially during the past few years of the COVID Pandemic. Filtering is a natural phenomenon that will always be present to some extent. The challenge is to ensure its happening naturally and not because of poor messaging quality and delivery.

4. Does your organization view messaging and communication in terms of a process?

At the end of the day, it's all about thinking of Communication Quality and Delivery as a process. As a government organization, we certainly understand that concept as there is a process for just about everything. Still, it's been my experience that we don't always elevate Communication to that level. Most likely it is because each Messaging effort requires a unique Design to ensure all the right boxes are checked.

Other challenges are that the boxes to check vary depending on the delivery methods involved. If a meeting, virtual or face-to-face, the process should ensure there are Ground Rules to manage participant behaviors such as silencing smart phones, keeping cameras on, as well as items like agendas and meeting objectives. Likewise, when the method involves written material, it's important to follow best practices typically associated with its development. PowerPoint is a great tool, but it's hard to captivate an audience when the developer attempts to fit Tolstoy's War and Peace onto one slide.

To be sure, there is extra effort to ensure effective messaging, but the risks of ineffective messaging are often the cause of wasteful rework and even worse, team distrust and disfunction. Taking some time to formally self-assess the status of your organization's Communication's efforts could prove to be time well spent.

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