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What Do You Mean, 'Communication'?

How people and organizations communicate

Nicki Stanton

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N.S.

June 1986

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Introduction

“I can’t really improve my ability to communicate with so few timetabled classes in business communication. I need something in between so that I can get lots of practice and check my own progress”. [Student on a BTEC business studies course.]

“I haven’t the time to attend a course on communication, but I do recognize the importance of communication at work and would like to improve my own skills and find out more about the subject. Can you recommend a book that I can work on, on my own?” [Trainee supervisor.]

“I’ve enjoyed this course, but obviously we’ve only been able to touch on the tip of the iceberg. Is there a book which I could use to continue studying business communication and which would give me, above all, some practice in using the techniques you’ve suggested?” [Manager at the end of a three-day course on business communication.]

In answer to all these queries and many others, I could recommend any one of a number of books on business communication – many of them interesting and valuable contributions to the subject, but the vast majority are either highly academic and rather awe-inspiring or else, despite being practical and down-to-earth, really dependent on the presence of a teacher to guide, correct and check the student’s progress.

In writing this book, my aim has therefore been

- to provide a comprehensive book which will stand on its own without the aid of a teacher, to help the student wishing to improve his communication skills, particularly those on BTEC and SCOTVEC courses
- to provide the harassed but caring teacher with something to fall back on when there is never enough time to spend on each student

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- to provide the ordinary reader with an interesting glimpse of the fascinating world of communication.

Becoming an effective communicator involves:

- understanding the way in which communication takes place;
- appreciating why communication sometimes fails;
- being sensitive to the way other people think and feel;
- understanding the techniques which we can use to improve our chances of communicating what we really mean.

All this, like any skill, requires effort and practice.

My job in writing this book is to help you ask the right questions and think about the answers – before you communicate, while you are communicating and after you have communicated.

The basic principles of communication are universal and can be applied in every aspect of your life, but this book looks at these theories, principles and practice in the context of communication in business. Whether or not you are a part of business, public or private – indeed whatever organization you belong to – you are affected by business in one way or another: as a customer, as an employee, as an owner or investor, as a shareholder, as a supplier, or simply as a neighbour.

How to use the book

Early on in each chapter you will find a description of the aims of the chapter. The text of the chapter will provide you with the essential knowledge which, in conjunction with your own experience, should enable you to tackle the practical questions which appear throughout the text. These questions are of three kinds:

Self-checks These are usually fairly short questions aimed at testing your knowledge and awareness of the essential issues at that point in the text. They will help you to study *actively* by encouraging you to think about what you are reading and about your experience of the way people communicate. The text that follows each self-check question will provide you with some

answers to these questions so that you can check how close your answers are to those that I provide. Try to discipline yourself to write down your answers to the self-check questions before you read the text that follows, since it is all too easy otherwise to convince yourself that you really know the answers and don't need to write them down! Put your confidence to the test.

Since it is also very tempting to glance ahead at the text, you might like to try using a card to cover it up, so that you can really be satisfied that you are answering the questions without the aid of any clues.

Finally don't be put off if you find that your answers don't completely match mine. Communication is a very complex process for the very reason that we all think about communication slightly differently. However, do consider the difference between your answers and mine – you will gain a great deal just from recognizing that others may not always think the same as you, and from reflecting on the reasons for and the potential results of these differences.

Reviews These are rather like self-checks in that they often consist of quite short questions or activities which you can mark for yourself, as the answers are provided immediately after the questions. However, as their name suggests, they look back and help you to assess how well you have grasped the points you have just read in the previous text. For this reason, you will usually find reviews either at the end of a chapter or at the end of major sections within a chapter.

Activities Although learning to communicate effectively does depend on being aware of the general principles and theory that lie behind the process of communicating, success largely depends on practice. Throughout the text you will therefore come across these longer exercises designed to encourage you to have a go at putting the principles into practice or observing how other people communicate. Activities are usually related to the part of the text you are reading or are about to read, so you should try to carry them out before reading on. However, because there are no 'right answers' provided in the text, you may like occasionally to treat these activities as an opportunity to break

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off from studying. You can then complete the activity at some convenient moment during the next few days before carrying on with the book.

Here again I know how easy it is to skip these activities and kid yourself that, since you know you could do them, there is really no need to bother. So my advice again is to be very strict with yourself, since you cannot hope to improve your expertise by merely reading about communication.

Using a tape-recorder

One of the problems of a self-study book on a subject like communication is that a book is, of course, an example of written communication and most of your answers will also be written. And yet the vast majority of the communication we take part in is spoken. In order to redress the balance somewhat, you will therefore find that some of the activities ask you to make use of a tape-recorder, so that you can assess for yourself how you sound, and how well you express yourself when speaking.

In addition, and if you have ready access to a small tape-recorder, you might like to consider using it to record some of your answers to the self-checks and review questions.

I have dealt with the various aspects of communication in the order I feel makes sense and many of the chapters will obviously assume some of the knowledge and techniques suggested in earlier chapters. However, each chapter is a self-contained unit and where there are links between chapters these are indicated in the text, so if you prefer to choose your own order of studying to fit in with your own needs, you should be able to do so without too much difficulty.

A final word

Above all, I hope that you will enjoy learning about communication and find it as rewarding and fascinating as I do. Unlike many subjects, every minute of every day provides a never-ending stream of examples of what you are studying.

Nicki Stanton

June 1986