
Business Administrator

Communication in a Business Environment



Introduction

Many surveys of employer identify communication skills as the single most important factor when selecting managers. Whatever role you have, in whatever organisation, you will need to communicate – with customers, suppliers and colleagues. No one works entirely in isolation.

All communication has a purpose: either to generate action, or to pass on or request information. Effective communication achieves its purpose by prompting the desired effect without the message losing its clarity during the process. If the receiver of the message is unable to understand it, the message will not have the desired effect.

Communication, whether it is written or verbal, has to follow certain conventions if it is to be understood. Conventions refer to the customary way in which things are done. They can be commonly accepted conventions (such as spelling, punctuation and grammar) or company-specific conventions (such as technical phrases or abbreviations).

In this theme you will cover the following learning outcomes:

- 1.** understand business communication channels models, systems and processes
- 2.** be able to communicate in writing to business queries from both inside and outside your organisation
- 3.** be able to communicate verbally to business queries from both inside and outside your organisation

Explanation of words used in this book and in a business environment

Stakeholder:	A person or group with a direct interest, involvement or investment in something
Motivate:	To make somebody feel enthusiastic, interested, and committed to something
Assumption:	Presuming something to be the case without knowing for sure
Cascade:	A downward flow of information
Jargon:	Language that is used within a group or profession that might not be understood or used by other people
Missive:	A formal letter or other written communication, often a legal communication
Spam:	An unsolicited, often commercial, message transmitted through the internet as a mass mailing to a large number of recipients
Jargon:	Language that is used by a group or profession, especially words and phrases which are not understood or used by other people
Experiential:	Relating to experience as opposed to other methods of acquiring knowledge
Psychological:	Relating to the mind or mental processes
Inflection:	A change in the pitch or tone of the voice

Business Communication

It is important to understand the communication needs of internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders include employees, colleagues, managers and owners or shareholders. External stakeholders include shareholders and others such as governmental bodies, communities, financiers, suppliers and customers.

Internal stakeholders' needs include knowing what business the organisation is in, who the customers are, specific details about products or services, where forms are located and who to see when there is a problem. They also need practical skills required to do their job well, which include communication skills, and interactions that give them a sense of belonging and self-worth, such as being listened to, respected, trusted and valued.

External stakeholders' needs include information to promote sales and publicity, generate sponsorship, announce events, products or services, and to support branding. Marketing professionals use persuasive techniques to influence others in their external communication strategies.

Communicating in a business environment always has a purpose: to send a message to an individual or group of people in order to request action, inform, teach, persuade, ***motivate*** or inspire. Communication is a process that must be understood if it is to be effective and avoid misunderstanding and confusion. It is successful only when the sender and the receiver understand the same message.

The Communication Process

According to communication theories, the process of communication consists of the following elements:

- The sender – the person sending the communication, who needs to be clear what they want to communicate, who to, how and why.
- The message – the information the sender wants to communicate must be clear and not capable of being misunderstood.
- 'Encoding' – putting the message into a form that can be understood. The sender needs to understand their audience and the level of knowledge of the subject, avoiding mistaken ***assumptions*** that may arise as a result of missing information or cultural issues.
- The channel – the method of sending the message. Channels may be written (for example letters, emails, memos or reports) or verbal (for example presentations or face-to-face meetings).

Think about the channel you will use to communicate.

- 'Decoding' – reading or hearing the message. The message can be misunderstood through a lack of knowledge, a poorly worded message or not enough time being given to consider its meaning.
- The audience – the individual reading or hearing the message. Even if the message is sent to a group, it is received by individuals, each of whom has to understand the

message. Individuals receiving the message may have pre-conceived ideas that will affect their interpretation of the message – the sender needs to take these into consideration when encoding it. If your message is being delivered to a group of people, they each have to understand the message.

- Feedback – the response that the sender gets from the receiver. Feedback allows the sender to judge whether the receiver has understood the message. This will tell them whether their communication has been effective and, if not, give them the opportunity to send a further message to correct any misunderstanding.
- Context – exterior factors that can affect effective communication of the message. These include factors such as language, culture and organisational culture.
- Intended outcomes – the desired result of the communication.

Consider the following when planning communication:

- Who is the message being sent from?
- What is the purpose of the message?
- When is the message being sent?
- To whom is the message being sent?
- Which model of communication is best in this case?

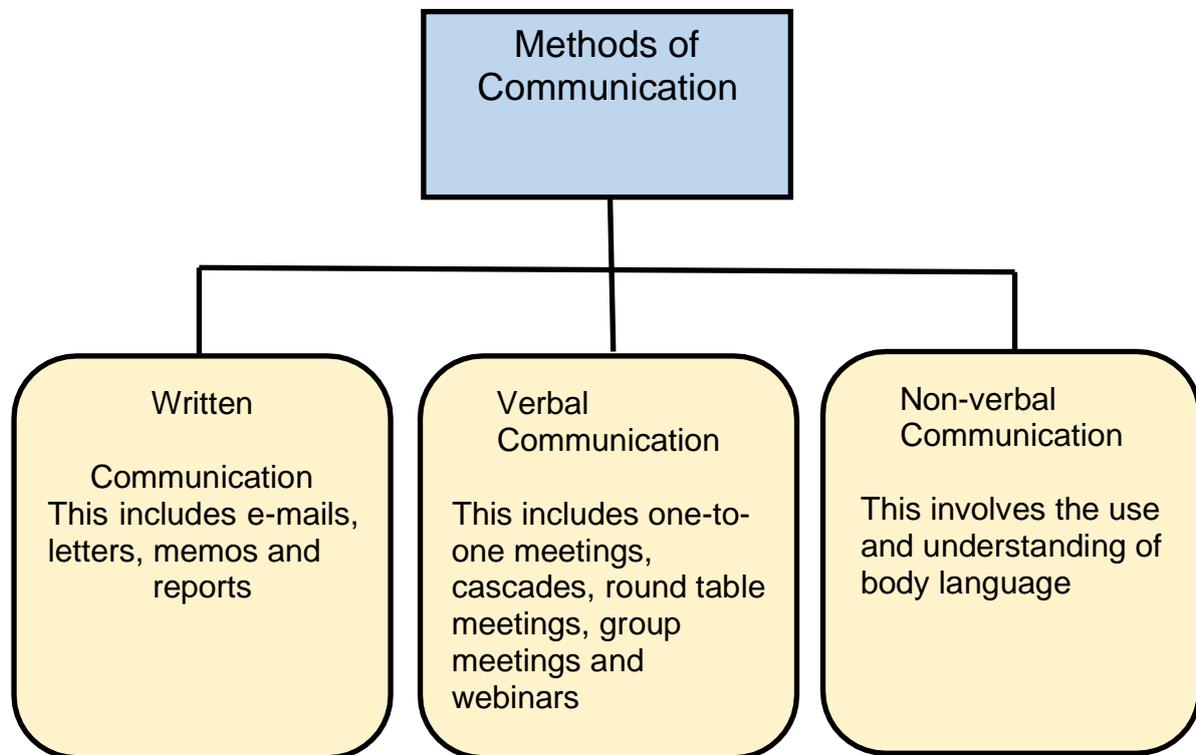
At each stage of the process, there may be barriers that make effective communication difficult. Barriers may include:

- poor listening skills
- lack of communication skills
- language problems
- technology breakdown
- prejudice and misconception
- conflicting messages
- lack of discussion
- environmental constraints.

It is important that you find ways of breaking down these barriers wherever possible. For instance, if a written message is poorly worded or a verbal message is poorly delivered, it is much more likely to be misunderstood. If too much information is delivered too quickly, the receiver may not have enough time to decode the message.

Methods of Communication

The following diagram shows different methods of communication.



Each method is best used in different circumstances. More formal communication is likely to need written communication, while verbal communication will often be appropriate to informal situations. Non-verbal communication is, of course, used whenever two or more people are together.

Remember that the written word is more 'powerful' than the spoken word, because it can be read again and again while the spoken word is either heard or not.

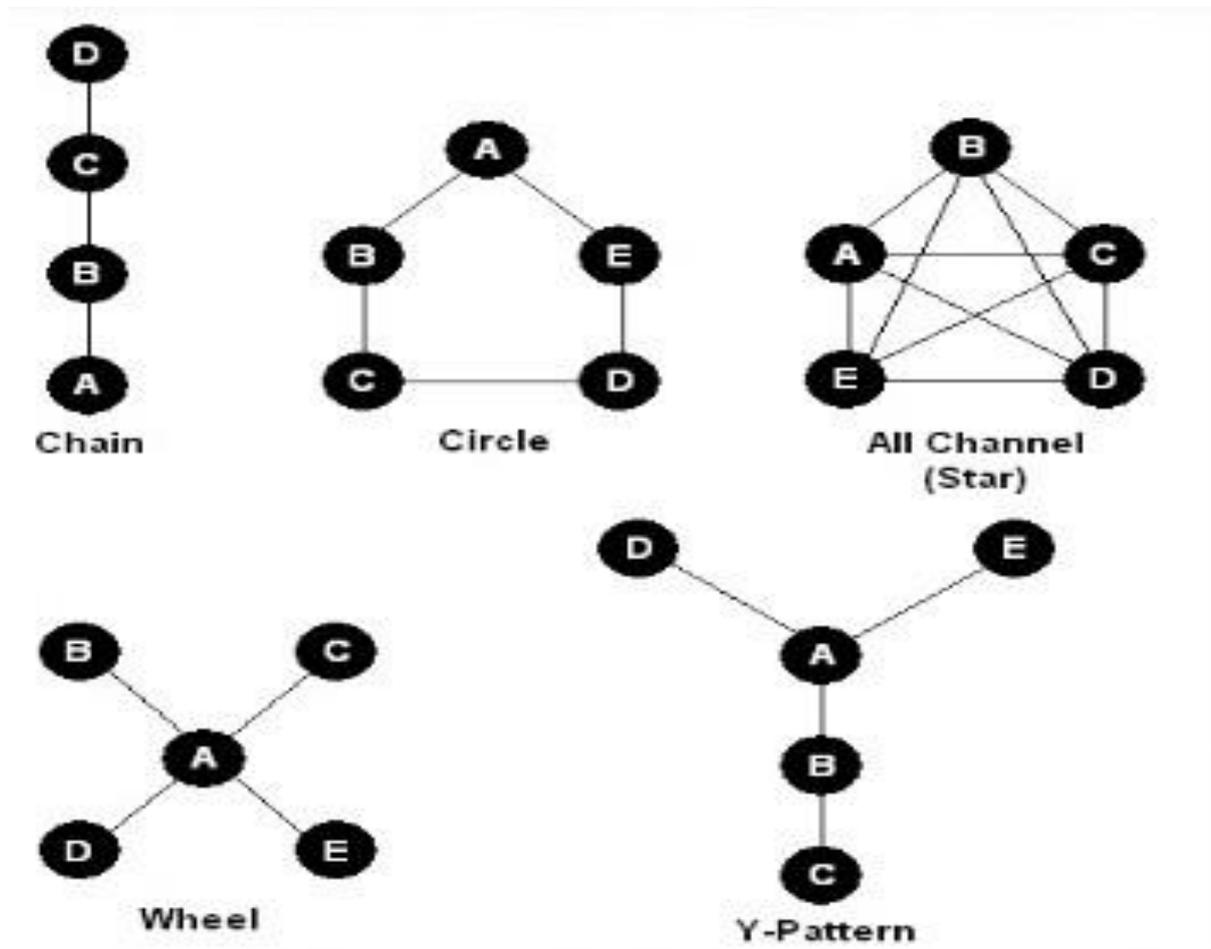
The common thread with all of the methods of communication is the passing of information from the sender to the receiver in a form that makes the message clearly understood. The method of communication you choose will depend on the urgency and complexity of the information being communicated. You will also need to adapt your communication for different audiences, both internal and external.

Patterns of Communication

There are several patterns or networks of communication that represent the direction and flow of communication within an organisation:

- 'The chain' is a hierarchical pattern that characterises strictly formal information flow, 'from the top down', such as in the military and some types of business organisations.
- 'The wheel' is found in a typical autocratic organisation, where one person governs and there is limited employee participation.

- 'The star or all-channel network' allows free flow of communication in a group, encouraging all of its members to become involved in group decision processes.
- 'The Y pattern' is a more complicated arrangement where the group is separated into three and the group members can communicate with the other members of the group through the leader.
- 'The circle' is where the sender can communicate only with group members next to him or her in the circle. Other group members can't receive the sender's message.



The chosen structure of communication within an organisation will have a significant influence on the accuracy of decisions, the speed with which those decisions are reached and the satisfaction of the people involved.

In networks where the responsibility for initiating and passing messages is shared more evenly among the members, better communication will be achieved.

Practical Tips for checking accuracy and the quality of your communication

Proofread your written messages before you send them. Read a hard copy of the document rather than reading on-screen and read the document backwards. This prevents your brain seeing what it knows should be there, rather than what is actually there. Don't rely entirely on the spell check function on your computer, as it doesn't know the difference between 'now' and 'know', for instance – both are correctly spelt but only one will be the correct word in the context.

When communicating on behalf of colleagues or your line manager, it is important to keep them informed of your progress towards meeting any deadlines they have given you. If you are experiencing difficulties, this will alert them to the need to plan for any effect that a delay in the communication going out may cause.

Keep a file copy of your written communications. If you have sent an email, it may be enough to keep a copy in the 'sent items' folder of your emails program, or alternatively your organisational procedure may be to file the emails in folders by subject or by the recipient's name, for example. Try to avoid printing out emails just to file them: this is a waste of resources.

If you have sent a letter, memo or report, your organisational procedure may be to file a hard copy in a filing cabinet but, as the communication will probably have been created electronically, it is more cost effective to keep the record electronically unless there is a real need to print off a copy.

Many organisations have shared drives (SharePoint, Teams) on their network which allow access to files for everyone who needs it. This may raise issues surrounding the security and confidentiality of the content.

Written Communication

Written communication in a business environment includes emails, letters, memos, agendas and minutes of meetings, notices and reports. Electronic written communication can also include different media such as graphics, sound and video, producing a more engaging communication that is relevant to your particular audience.

While each form of written communication has its own conventions, they all require you to use the three main elements of written communication.

Structure

The first element is structure, which refers to the way that you lay out the content. To organise the structure of your communication, think about what you want the receiver to understand from your message.

Identify the key points and facts that you are trying to convey and put them into a logical order. Make sure you start with a powerful introduction, as this will create a positive first impression.

Use headings, sub-headings and bullet-points to help the receiver identify the main points of the message. Write in short sentences and paragraphs that are to the point. Each paragraph should start with a main point, followed by supporting information.

Finish the communication with a conclusion or a recommendation, or by re-stating the main point of the message (depending on the purpose of the communication). The last paragraph is the one the receiver will remember longest, so don't use it to waffle on after you have made your main point.

Style and Tone

The second element is style and tone, which refer to the way that you write. All business communication should be to the point, simple, direct and clear. As a rough guide, sentences should contain no more than 30 words, and paragraphs should be no more than 10 lines long.

Written communication in general, and letters and emails especially, should be kept as short as possible while containing all the necessary information. If people receive a lot of letters or emails, they will tend to first look to see who it is from and then read it if it is short. If it looks too long, they will put it aside and read it when they have time. An effective business letter or email should consist of no more than three paragraphs of four or five lines per paragraph.

In any written communication, you need to consider how much information and how much detail should be included, and how formal the message is. This will depend to a great extent on the message's intended audience. If you are writing an article for a broadsheet newspaper, such as The Times, you would use a different style from an article about the same subject in a tabloid, such as The Mirror.

Write positively: if you have to communicate to your customers about a price increase, point out the excellent value that your product or service still gives, and remind them of the benefits it has over your competitors. The exception might be when you have had to deal with a disciplinary or performance issue involving a team member. After initially discussing the situation verbally you will have to record the outcome formally in writing, and it might be inappropriate to write positively in this situation.

The first sentence of any communication should be interesting in order to help capture the interest of the receiver. The majority of the communication should be relevant to the receiver – people are always more interested in themselves than in you and want to know what the benefit will be to them, so address them directly using ‘you’ and ‘your’ as much as possible.

Jargon and abbreviations should be avoided unless they will definitely be understood by the receiver or are explained within the communication. Short, familiar words should be used rather than obscure, complex words. Active words should be used: for example, say ‘I think ...’ rather than ‘It is thought ...’. And use single words rather than phrases that mean the same thing: for example, use a word such as ‘now’ instead of a phrase such as ‘at this point in time’.

Content

The third element is content, which refers to what you are writing about. The information you need to communicate may have come from a variety of sources, including your own research and information that has been passed to you for the specific purpose of communicating it to a wider audience. You need to think through what your message is, making sure your objective is clear. Check that you have made your essential points clearly and developed your argument logically. Make the content positive and constructive, and don’t allow detail to obscure the main issues. Don’t write for the sake of writing: people are busy and don’t have time to read unnecessary messages.

Use plain English. This will allow the receiver to understand exactly what you mean. Plain English is written clearly and is to the point so that the reader can take the required action. The simple rules for writing in plain English are:

- Write in short sentences.
- Use everyday words, not jargon.
- Use personal words such as ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’.
- Write as directly and to the point as possible.

Customers expect to be treated with respect and using plain English when writing to them is one way to do this. Before you send your message, read it and think how you would feel if you received it. If your reaction is the one you intend, then send it; if not, re-write it.

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar

Spelling, punctuation and grammar are all vital to effective communication. An incorrectly spelt, badly punctuated and ungrammatical message will give a very poor impression of you to your colleagues if used internally and of the whole organisation if sent to customers, clients or suppliers. Even people whose own standard of written English is poor can recognise when they receive a badly written message!

Poor spelling, punctuation and grammar can also totally alter the meaning of your message, potentially with serious consequences. A misplaced or omitted comma can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Consider the following:

“Let’s eat kids”

“Let’s eat, kids”

The addition of a comma after the word 'eat' have completely changed the meaning of this sentence!

Punctuation

There are lots of punctuation marks that you need to know how to use correctly if your text is to be completely accurate, but the most important are:

- Full stops – used at the end of sentences or to indicate an abbreviation.
- Commas – used to separate individual words in a list or to indicate where a pause is intended in a sentence.
- Apostrophes – used to indicate a missing letter ('he's' meaning 'he is') or that something belongs to someone (St John's Wood, The King's Head).

Spelling

Practise spelling words correctly, if you need to. And remember that some word processing programs use American English rather than 'English (UK)' as their basic dictionary: these may indicate that a word is correct when it is actually incorrect, and vice versa, so check this and alter the settings if you can.

As well as improving your spelling, it is important to improve your knowledge of the meaning of words. There are a number of words in the English language which are commonly confused with each other (see the table on this page); learn their correct meaning and you will not misuse them.

Grammar

The third part of language that you need to understand is the correct use of grammar. There are far too many rules of grammar to cover in a book like this, but the key parts of speech to understand are:

- Nouns – these are the names of people, places or things, such as 'laptop', 'medal', 'James' or 'Norwich'.
- Pronouns – these are used to replace nouns to avoid repetition, such as 'he', 'she', 'his' or 'theirs'.
- Verbs – these are used to indicate action or being, such as 'to be', 'to type' or 'to watch'.
- Adverbs – these are used to describe a verb, such as 'to type accurately' or 'to watch closely'. They usually end in -ly.
- Adjectives – these describe a noun, such as 'a new laptop', 'a gold medal', 'handsome James' or 'beautiful Norwich'.

Parts of speech are joined together into sentences, and sentences are joined together into paragraphs. Sentences should express a single thought; paragraphs should contain sentences on a single topic.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication includes making presentations, using the telephone, speaking to people one-to-one, and holding discussions with two or more people. The principles of effective verbal communication are the same whatever the context.

- Speak clearly – if you are nervous about the situation, you will speak more quickly than if you are relaxed, and this will make it more difficult for people to understand you. Make sure you have prepared (at least mentally) what you want to say, stick to the point, and avoid waffling or unnecessarily repeating yourself. If possible, give examples that your audience will be able to relate to in support of your arguments.
- Speak appropriately – consider the culture, background and level of understanding of your audience and use English correctly. If your levels of grammar and vocabulary come across as below those expected by your audience, you will be seen as lazy, under educated or, at worst, disrespectful if it is perceived that you are 'dumbing down' your delivery. In an increasingly global workplace, it is more important than ever to speak English well if you are to be understood by people who have learnt it as a foreign language.
- Speak thoughtfully – consider your audience and the effect your message may have on them. Remember to make the conversation about the people you are speaking to, rather than about you, wherever possible. People much prefer talking about themselves – it is everyone's favourite subject. Ask questions and show interest in the answers. Try to remember personal details so that next time you speak to them you can ask how their husband/wife/ child/dog is. This will encourage dialogue and give you the opening you need to get your message across. Everybody prefers working with people they like, so make people like you.
- Speak sincerely – if you think someone has made a particularly good effort, tell them so. Show interest in your colleagues by congratulating them, but be careful not to be insincere – people can tell if you are saying 'well done' while thinking 'lucky so-and-so'. Avoid any personal remarks as innocently intended comments on a colleague's physical attributes, for instance, can be misunderstood and lead to a variety of problems.
- Speak confidently – if you don't believe what you are saying then you shouldn't be surprised if no one else does, either. You can demonstrate confidence in what you are saying through the way you speak. Think about the pace, pitch and volume of your voice – although this doesn't mean you should shout at your audience! Stand upright, make eye contact but don't stare, as that is very disconcerting.

It isn't enough that you understand what you are saying, you must also be sure that the recipient has also correctly understood the message. You can confirm this through:

- Paraphrasing – this means saying what you said in a different way.
- Probing – this means questioning closely.
- Clarifying – this means making a statement clear and free from ambiguity.
- Verifying – this means ascertaining the truth or correctness of a statement.

- Summarising – this means giving a brief recap of previously stated facts or statements.

People hear what you say against a background of their own experiences and opinions, which might completely alter the meaning.

Be clear about what you are saying, but don't over complicate it with too much detail.

Only 10% of what you say is actually received by the listener. Try to avoid using jargon and abbreviations which might not be familiar to them, or long difficult words which you might think will impress them but in fact only obscure the point you are trying to make.

If the purpose of your verbal communication is to resolve a problem, remember that the best way to get answers from people is to ask questions. If you start by stating the problem and ask for opinions or suggestions, you will get a more balanced response than if you start with your solution to the problem and ask if people agree with it.

If you are dealing with poor performance or behaviour, ask for their side of the story before you make a decision on how you are going to handle the situation; you may be surprised to find that the actual problem is completely different from what you imagine it to be.

Listening

'Hearing' and 'listening' are not the same thing. We all hear lots of things we don't listen to, such as background noise. Listening is a conscious activity aimed at understanding what you hear. Unfortunately, even when we listen we don't necessarily hear. People speak at up to 175 words per minute, but we are able to listen intelligently at up to 800 words per minute, so there is a lot of spare capacity which we usually fill by thinking about something else.

There are seven levels of listening:

1. ***Passive listening*** – you are not really listening at all, simply hearing background noise.
2. ***Pretend listening*** – you are giving all the outward signs of listening (nodding, smiling, saying 'of course') but you are really thinking about something else.
3. ***Selective listening*** – you have already made up your mind what your response is going to be, so have stopped listening.
4. ***Misunderstood listening*** – you are hearing what you want to hear, not what is actually being said.
5. ***Active listening*** – you are listening attentively, understanding feelings and gathering facts.

6. **Empathic listening** – you are understanding feelings and checking facts, with the speaker's purpose in mind.
7. **Facilitative listening** – you are listening with the speaker's purpose uppermost in your mind.

In a business environment, you need to be listening at or above the 'active' level. In many conversations, nobody is listening and everybody is simply taking turns to speak. Everybody is more interested in giving their own views than in listening to those of other people. At the same time, we all want to be listened to and understood.

Active listening requires you to:

- stop what you are doing
- look at the speaker
- let others speak
- be interested in what is being said
- ask open-ended questions to clarify what you hear
- spend more time listening than talking
- not finish the speaker's sentences
- not interrupt
- avoid answering questions with questions
- plan your response after the speaker has finished, not while they are talking
- only give your own opinions after you have heard the speaker's.

When you have listened actively to what is being said, summarise it in your own words so the speaker can confirm that you have understood it. Even if people are actively listening, there may still be barriers that prevent the message being understood. These can be divided into physical barriers, **experiential** barriers and **psychological** barriers.

Physical barriers are things like background noise, the physical environment and stress. The message can be misunderstood if it cannot be clearly heard because of noise from other people speaking or from equipment being operated. Environmental distractions might include bright lights, passing people or traffic, or any other distraction. Stress causes misunderstanding because we do not hear things the same way when we are under stress.

Experiential barriers arise because everyone has a different experience of life which affects the way they understand what they hear. Our culture, background and inbuilt bias all alter our reaction to information we receive. We are also influenced by our perception of the person we are listening to. If we consider them to be an expert on the subject, we automatically give more authority to what they say than we do to someone we think knows less about it than we do.

Psychological barriers include an inability to separate the message from the way we feel about ourselves. This leads to us reacting defensively if we feel the message is intended as a verbal attack, or with feelings of superiority if we feel we know more about the subject than the person delivering it. We may also find ourselves listening to the words rather than the meaning of the message, especially if we feel strongly about particular words being used.

For example, if we think calling an actor a 'genius' is overstating the facts, we will focus on the use of the word rather than what is actually being said about her.

Non-Verbal Communication

An important part of verbal communication is, strangely enough, non-verbal communication, in other words what we say without speaking. Body language is an extremely complex subject which even the acknowledged experts disagree about, but there are some simple clues that you give off all the time and which you can learn to read in others.

The primary elements of body language are usually listed as:

- The face – the most obvious source of expression, your face can smile, frown, and show anger, disgust or disbelief. Smiling is used to indicate friendliness, happiness or non-threatening behaviour.
- The eyes – perhaps more difficult to control than your facial expression, your eyes can make or avoid contact with other people, and look 'shifty' or express sympathy. Eye contact is usually an indication of interest or concern – but be careful as different cultures interpret eye contact in different ways.
- Posture – the way you hold your head, the way you stand or folding your arms all express your feelings towards other people. Standing erect and leaning forward means that you are approachable.
- Gestures – we all know and understand basic gestures, such as a wave hello or goodbye, but there is a whole language of gestures – and just to confuse the issue further they differ between different nationalities and cultures. Speaking without gestures gives the impression of

being uncomfortable with that you are saying.

- Voice – while what you say is verbal communication, how you say it – tone, volume, pace, pitch, rhythm and inflection – is considered non-verbal. Vary these six elements and you will avoid being boring, dull and monotonous.
- Movement – the way you move gives off messages. Moving towards someone may be friendly or threatening, depending on the context and manner, while moving away may be submissive or dismissive. Try not to invade other people's personal space.

You can use combinations of these elements to deliver or interpret non-verbal messages. Make sure your words match your tone and your body language. Look at the person you are speaking to or, if you are speaking to a group, look at each of them in turn unless you are directing a comment or question to one individual.

While you are speaking, look at the audience for signs of confusion and ask the listeners if they are following what you are saying. Give them the chance to comment or ask questions. Remember that verbal communication should always be a two-way process; if you just wanted to get your point across, without comment or discussion, you could have written to them. It is important to confirm that they have understood correctly what you wanted to communicate.

Over to you!

Submit a written assignment to:

- 1. Explain the factors that affect the choice of communication media**
- 2. Explain the importance of using correct grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling and conventions in business communications**
- 3. Explain the factors to be taken into account in planning and structuring different communication media**
- 4. Explain ways of overcoming barriers to communication**
- 5. Explain the use of communications theories and body language**
- 6. Explain proof-reading techniques for business communication**