

Leadership Skills

MODULE 2: COMMUNICATION

The ability to communicate effectively is a significant asset to a political leader, but this doesn't mean that you necessarily have to be a great speaker. There are many examples of good leaders who are not necessarily great speakers. Our communication style can be defined in several ways. Some styles may be defined according to a preference of introversion (think-speak-think) compared to extraversion (speak-think-speak). Some of our communication style may also be found on the spectrum between being passive or being aggressive, or somewhere in-between.

Activity 1: Communication Style

Let's take a few moments to reflect on your communication style by answering the questions below. Be prepared to share your responses:

1. How would your friends and family describe your communication style?

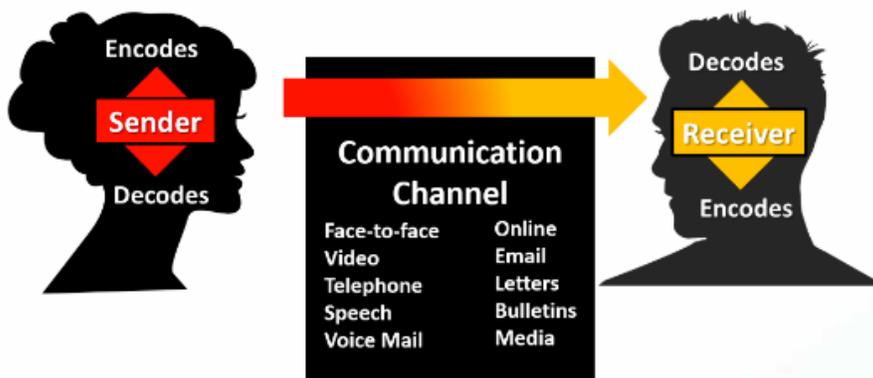
2. What are your strengths when it comes to communicating?

3. When do you struggle to communicate effectively?

4. As a potential candidate, what communication best practices are you aware of that you will work on to achieve?

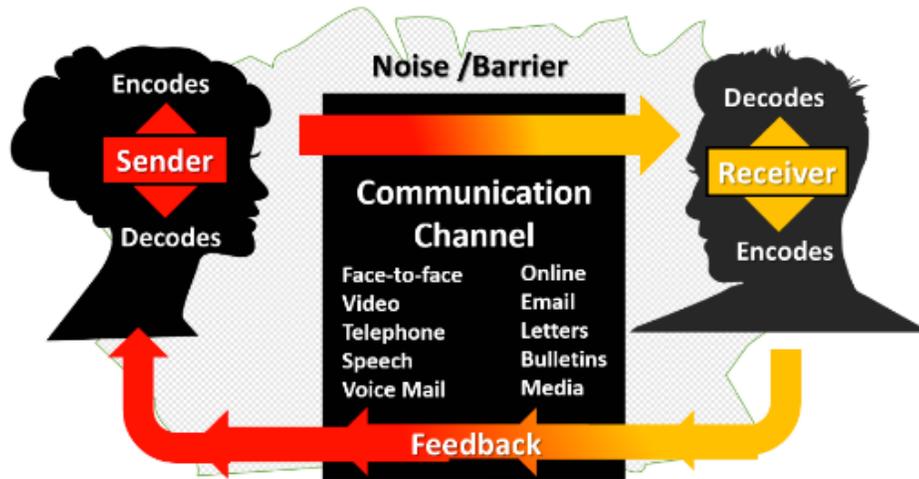
It is important to recognize how communication occurs. Let's use a conversation between two people as an illustrative model to demonstrate the communication cycle.

Figure 1 illustrates the communication process. It shows that the sender is a person, department, or unit of an organization or system who originates the message.



A sender uses words and symbols to put forth information into a message for the receiver—the individual(s) receiving the message. Messages are then received and decoded or interpreted by the receiver.

Figure 2 illustrates that decoding is affected by the receiver's prior experiences and frames of reference. Structural and personal barriers may influence how the receiver decodes the message.



To ensure that messages are received as intended, feedback is a necessary component of the communication process.

The receiver creates feedback to a message and encodes it before transmitting it back to the sender. The sender receives and decodes the feedback.

If your intended message is not being received as intended, it may be helpful to explore the possible barriers that may be obscuring your intent. Many communication barriers occur as either personal or environmental barriers. Personal barriers arise from the nature of individuals and their interaction with others. Environmental barriers are characteristic of an organization and its environmental setting.

Here are some examples of personal and environmental barriers as well as some possible strategies to overcome the barriers, where possible:

Barriers to Communication	Overcoming Barriers to Communication
ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS	
1. Competition for time and attention	1. Devote adequate time and attention to listening
2. Multiple levels of hierarchy	2. Reduce the number of links or levels of hierarchy
3. Managerial philosophy	3. Change philosophy to encourage the free flow of communication
4. Power/status relationships	4. Consciously tailor words and symbols and reinforce words with actions so that messages are understandable
5. Organizational complexity	5. Use multiple channels of the community to reinforce the complex message
6. Specific terminology	6. Consciously define and tailor words and symbols and reinforce words with actions so that messages are understandable
PERSONAL BARRIERS	
1. Frame of reference	1. Consciously engage in efforts to be cognizant of other's frame of reference and beliefs
2. Beliefs	2. Recognize that others will engage in selective perception, jealousy, fear, prejudices to help diminish the barriers
3. Values	3. Engage in empathy
4. Prejudices	
5. Selective perception	
6. Jealousy	
7. Fear	
8. Evaluate the source (sender)	
9. Status quo	
10. Lack of empathy	

Source: Based on the Longest, B.B., Rakich, J.S., & Darr, K. (2000). *Managing health services organizations* (4th ed.). Baltimore, MD; Health Professions Press, Inc., pp. 808-810.

Emotions

Emotions can help you communicate effectively, but they can also prevent you from communicating clearly. When trying to influence others, emotions can be helpful to persuade others in feeling empathy, passion or even anger, if provoking a sense of injustice towards taking restorative action. However, when emotions are not recognized or managed with control, they have the potential to derail your message and compromise your ability to communicate clearly and effectively. Make sure your message doesn't get lost in your delivery.

Anger tends to be an emotion that many leaders work on to develop strategies to recognize their triggers. When these triggers are intercepted or managed, leaders maximize the effectiveness of their intended message.

Take a moment to think about your emotional triggers. What type of behavior, situation or language may trigger you to begin to lose control of your emotions?

TRIGGER	ASSOCIATED EMOTION	THE RESPONSE IN YOUR BODY
Example: when people use derogatory language	Example: anger	Example: face becomes red, muscles tense, heart races

You also need to be aware of non-verbal communication. This is especially true in the NWT where communications is often influenced by language and culture. For example, among some Indigenous people, when a listener nods their head it does not necessarily mean agreement, it may simply be the listener acknowledging that the speaker is speaking to him or her.

Consider how people in your community may communicate the following both verbally and non-verbally:

- Appreciation
- Respect
- You choose one...
- Anger
- Frustration

Listening

Listening to others effectively is a skill that many leaders continually work to master. Our brains are overloaded with a stimulus that can easily distract us. Distractions can come in the form of actual physical distractions such as background noise or an accent that makes understanding someone else difficult. Distractions can also come in the form of getting lost in our own thoughts or in preparation to respond so that we are no longer actively engaged in listening to the speaker.

It's important that we take time to pay attention to how we are listening to others. If we are actively listening, we are listening with the intent to understand, not to respond. Effective leaders are indeed leaders because their followers trust them and feel understood by them.

In a leadership position, you may feel pressure to respond to issues quickly. However, it's important to ensure that you have taken the time to adequately understand many sides of an issue by listening to various perspectives of others to appropriately respond with your understanding of what you have heard. Summarizing what you think you heard is a good way of clarifying your understanding of what has been said. By doing that, you are letting the person raising the concern know that they have been heard but also gives you the time to think about a possible response.

Summary

As an elected official, it's important to have the confidence to think on your feet and in the moment. However, it's advisable to hold back your initial thoughts and ideas on issues that may appear to be controversial or divisive until you've done your homework on all sides of an issue. Having time to prepare your position so that you can clearly communicate your underlying interests is a beneficial approach to clear and effective communication.
