

Basic Communication Principles

Irish playwright and essayist George Bernard Shaw once said, “The problem with communication is the illusion that it has occurred.” Why is it that we can track so many of our problems back to “communication?” Could it be that we don’t really understand the fundamentals of communication?

With that in mind, let’s take a few minutes to understand this very basic function of life.

First, what is “communication?” The best definition I’ve found is this:

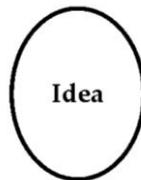
Communication is the transfer of an idea from one mind to another, as intended.

It's almost impossible to understand how an idea can be transferred from one sealed vault (our minds) to another. Only the human being has this capability. But for it to happen, we have to develop an awareness of what communication is and how it works.

There are three things to consider in communications, as follows:

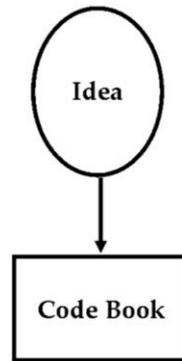
- **PURPOSE** – the **WHY** of communication - we communicate to get action. If there's no action, there's no communication. Until the receiver of the information is able to understand the information, no communication has been established.
- **PLAN** – the **WHEN** of communication. It’s important that we pick the best time to communicate.
- **PROCESS** – the **HOW** of communication. What medium and which tools should we use? Is our communication so important that it must be face-to-face? Do we use the phone or email? Is our communication formal or informal?

A simple, seven-step diagram will help us to understand how communication works. We start with an **Idea**, which originates in the information source – our mind. At this point, there is no form to the Idea, maybe not even words.

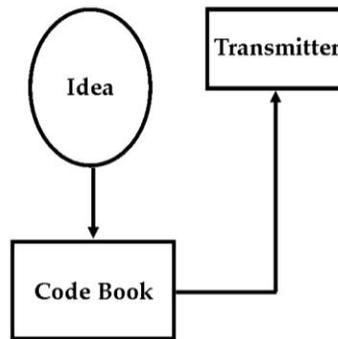


To put the Idea in a form in which we can express it, we have to send it through our **Code Book**. The Code Book actually puts a symbol to the idea. Words and letters are merely symbols. The symbol we attach to our Idea depends on what’s in our Code Book. So it’s important to understand what our Code Book contains. Simply, it includes things like our experiences, knowledge, attitudes, abilities,

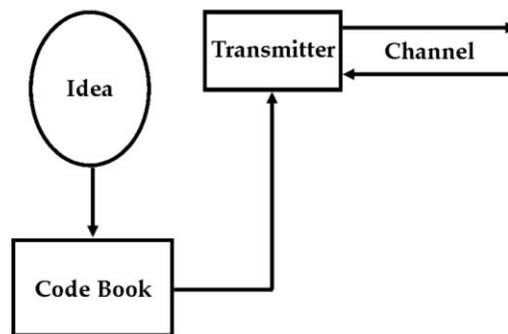
and emotions. It also contains our language ability, such as our vocabulary. Our Code Book is the total of all our life's experiences – everything we have ever learned or experienced.



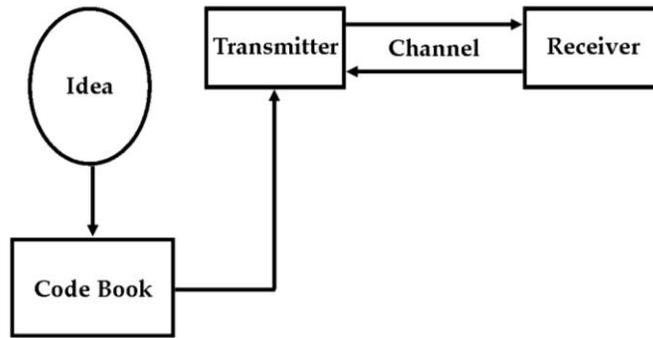
Now that our Idea has more substance, we can send it to our **Transmitter**. This is the first time the Idea sees the light of day. Transmitters are such things as our voice, our hand (writing or typing), or even our eye (such as a wink).



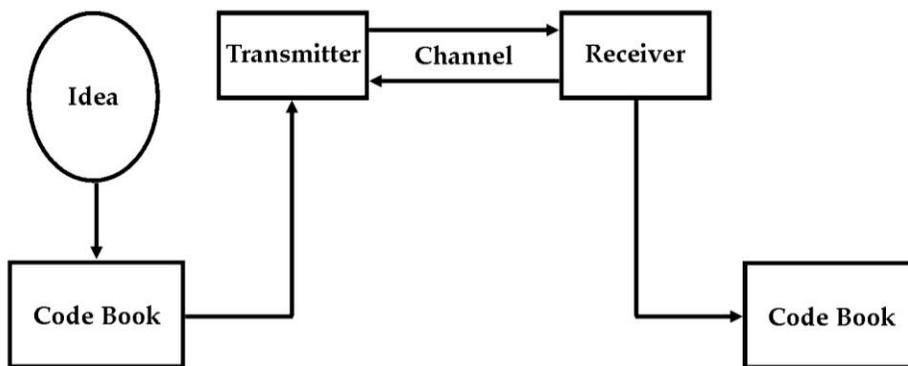
The Transmitter sends the Idea across a **Channel**. This is the medium used to transmit the Idea. It can include the air (voice, pictures, or electronic signals), paper (letters, memos, or reports), wire (phone), touch (empathy), and other means. Our lives are full of Channels today. Television and the Internet can be considered Channels, although in the basic form, these are really combinations of Channels. For example, television uses the Channels of air and wire.



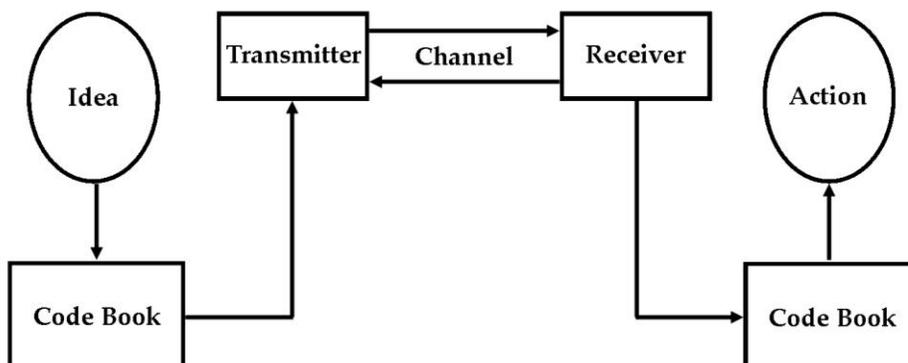
After the Idea has crossed the Channel, it goes to a **Receiver**. The Receiver is any of the five senses of the person to whom we are sending our Idea.



So, we have communicated, right? Well, not quite. Our Idea still has to go through the Receiver's Code Book, which contains the total life experiences and knowledge of the Receiver. In that sense, the two Code Books are the same. But we will see how they are also different in a minute.



After passing through the Receiver's Code Book, the Idea results in **Action**. If the Idea has been properly encoded, effectively transmitted across a channel and received, and has been properly decoded, the Action is a true reflection of the Idea.



But consider all the places where problems can arise. There is the potential of differences within the two Code Books. There can be a faulty apparatus in the Transmitter or Receiver. Or, there can be a faulty Channel.

The last two are relatively easy to identify and correct. But typically, 50 percent of the meaning of an idea is lost because of differences in the two Code Books. Even though the two Code Books contain the same type of information, our experiences and attitudes may be completely different. This is one of the major areas where we can improve communication, by adjusting our Code Book to be as similar as possible to the other person's Code Book. There is an equal responsibility for both sender and receiver to attempt to match Code Books.

There are several Code Book variations to recognize which can create stumbling blocks to communication:

- We tend to think in our frame of reference, not the other person's.
- Words mean different things to different people. For example, how would you answer the verbal question, "How do you make a venetian blind?" Would it make a difference if you knew that my Code Book had capitalized "Venetian?" Or, how do you define the word, "draft?" Is it a horse, a bank check, a report, an air current? There are dozens of dictionary definitions of that single word.
- The amount of information we provide has a bearing on our ability to communicate. We must give all necessary information, but only necessary information. Our Code Books tend to fill in information we already know, which causes us to leave gaps. If we leave gaps, the other person will use their Code Book to fill in those gaps, possibly with information we didn't intend.
- There may be a difference between the sending rate and the receiving rate. If we send information too fast, it will be missed. Information sent too slow causes boredom and mind-wandering.
- Our position in life can cause Code Book camouflage. There are a number of common areas of camouflage, such as:
 - Relationships – boss/employee, parent/child, financial status. We tend to more readily accept what is said by those with higher positions of authority and greater wealth.
 - Reputation – this goes both ways. A person's reputation may either cause us to think "he knows it all" or "he doesn't know anything."
 - Age – up to a point, we may accept what is said by someone older. But there comes a time when age can be a detriment in accepting what is communicated.

All these stumbling blocks cause what we call "noise" in communication. Here's an exercise that will demonstrate communication noise. Gather several people together and tell them you want to ask them a question. Tell them it's a simple question, and you need an immediate answer. Build up to the question by rolling up your sleeves, folding and unfolding your hands, etc. In other words, use motions that call attention to your hands. Then, waving your hands in front of everyone's faces, ask this question: "Quick: How do deaf people read?" Most of them will say, "Braille." Of course, deaf people read with their eyes. But you've created a lot of "noise" in your communication by calling attention to your hands!

So far, our emphasis has been mostly on the transmission part of communications. But the reception is just as important. Of course, there are a number of ways to receive communication. But let's concentrate on a reception area that is many times overlooked.

Let's talk about **listening**! Studies show that we spend seven out of every 10 waking minutes communicating. If we are awake for 16 hours, that's 11 ½ hours of communication. And here's how we spend that time:

- Writing – 9%
- Reading – 16%
- Speaking – 30%
- Listening – 45%

We've all had courses in school where we learned to write and read. Many of us have also had courses in speaking. But very few of us have ever had formal training in listening. This is very unfortunate, because we typically think at a rate of about 500 words per minute. But we only speak at a rate of about 125 words per minute. So we think – and listen four times faster than we speak.

The way we use our extra “thinking” time while listening to someone speaking determines just how effectively we listen.

Consider these three levels of listening:

- a. *I can hear* – this involves the ear. It simply means that the mechanism of the ear is working.
- b. *I can repeat it back* – this involves the brain. How many times have you had this type of situation with your children:

You – “Johnny, go clean up your room.”

Johnny – no action

You - repeat the sentence again – maybe several times.

Johnny – still no action

You (in exasperation) – “Johnny, did you hear me?”

Johnny – “Yes, Mom.”

You – “Okay, what did I say?”

Johnny – “You told me to clean up my room.”

Johnny's ear works and his brain works. But all he did was to make his brain function like a record/playback device. He recorded what you said and he played it back. But there was no action.

- c. *True listening* – this involves the mind. True listening creates empathy and understanding, hearing the feeling behind the words. Ultimately, it creates action.

Why do we listen? There are four main reasons, as follows:

- a. To learn – to increase our knowledge
- b. To understand – to gain insight
- c. For pleasure – to relax (music is the best example of this)
- d. To give others an opportunity to talk – as strange as this may sound, it's a valid reason for listening!

Listening is a skill that can be learned. The best way to learn a skill is to practice it. So here are some specific suggestions for listening:

- Stop talking – this is the first thing you have to do. It is physiologically impossible for the human being to talk and listen at the same time. Hearing becomes listening only when the mind is in gear and focused on the subject at hand.
- Empathize with the speaker - try to understand why he feels the way he does.
- Ask questions – this accomplishes two purposes. It will give you greater knowledge and insight, and it keeps the other person talking. Use that extra “mind” time to think of questions about “why” and “how.” Get the speaker to elaborate.
- Don’t interrupt – especially, don’t assume you know what the speaker is going to say.
- Show interest – this can be done by physical actions and verbalizing what you have heard. But it can’t be ‘faked.’
- Give your undivided attention to the speaker. Someone once said, “Wherever you are, be all there!” Put the blinders on to all else.
- Don’t jump to conclusions.
- Don’t argue mentally – this is so easy to do with our extra ‘mind’ time. But you can’t argue something you haven’t heard. So it’s important to be sure you hear everything the speaker has to say.
- Don’t let what you want to hear color what you really do hear. Don’t get carried away by your hopes and aspirations. Above all, work to put aside your stereotypes and expand your own “Code Book.”

Here’s an example of how a stereotype can get in the way of communication:

A father and his son were driving across a bridge. They had an accident. The father was killed and the son was seriously injured. In the emergency room, the doctor said, “Wait, I can’t operate. This boy is my son!”

How is that possible? Depending on your age, you may think that only men can be doctors. But this emergency room doctor was the boy’s mother!

An old school newsletter contained this article:

We learn...

- ...10% of what we read
- ...20% of what we hear
- ...30% of what we see
- ...50% of what we both see and hear
- ...70% of what we discuss with others
- ...80% of what we personally experience in real life
- ...95% of what we teach to someone else

These figures were taken from a presentation by William Glasser, based on a research project. Not having read the research, I can’t vouch for the validity of the numbers. But I think they do suggest some ways to increase our learning. Discussing what we have learned with others increases our learning from 20 to 60 percent, depending on whether the original learning was only by seeing or was by seeing and hearing.