

# Topic 7 Section 1

# Good Communication Practices

## Contents

Why is Communication Important?.....	2
What is Communication? .....	3
Sending Messages .....	7
Receiving Messages .....	9
Common Experience .....	9
Tone .....	10
Use of Non-discriminatory Terms .....	10
Non-verbal Communication.....	12
The Benefits of Active Listening .....	13
Barriers to Communication and Overcoming Them.....	13
Section 1 – Assessment Activities .....	16

# Why is Communication Important?

Studies in the workplace show that managers and supervisors spend between 75% and 95% of their workday communicating (talking, listening, reading, and writing). Somewhere between half and three-quarters of this time will be spent in verbal communication. This, for example, could be in face-to-face situations, on the telephone, in meetings, etc. For a person working an eight-hour day, this would mean that he/she would spend between 6 and 7.5 hours in general communication and of that three to four hours would be verbal communication.

At a supervisory level in the construction industry, you would expect to communicate with several of the following people listed below on a day-to-day basis and some of them on an occasional basis:

- Your client's representatives (engineers, inspectors, planners, etc)
- Your manager
- Workers for whom you are responsible
- Union representatives
- Your administrative office (pays, accounts, etc)
- Local council representatives
- Sub-contractors
- Suppliers
- Local property owners
- Local providers of accommodation
- Local providers of utility services (telephones, water, power, etc)
- Dial Before You Dig
- Members of the police service
- Members of the public
- Members of action organisations (environmentalists, etc)
- Protestors, etc.



When something has the potential to take up such a large part of the working day, it is important to ensure to ensure it is done as efficiently as possible. It therefore makes good sense for us to become the most effective and efficient communicators that we can be in our workplaces. Not only because communication takes up a large part of the day but also because safety, productivity and workplace efficiency depend upon it.

This section will explain how to communicate effectively and efficiently with others in the workplace. Although there are many ways to do this, there are two main points to remember:

- If it is worth saying, it is worth saying clearly and effectively.
- The purpose of communication is to make the receiver understand your message.

# What is Communication?

In its most basic form, communication is a transfer of a meaning or idea from a sender to a receiver. The sender and receiver could be a pair of human beings in conversation or a single person addressing a small group or an orchestra playing to a large audience. It could also, for example, be a dog with a bone growling to warn another off. Whatever the case, all forms of communication have a certain number of things in common.

For communication to exist there must be at least the following:

- Message
- Sender
- Channel
- Receiver

## Message

A message is an idea or instruction that the sender wants to pass on to the receiver. There are many possibilities for the purpose of the message. Some examples of the purposes of messages might include any or a combination of the following:

- A greeting or acknowledgement of the receiver/s
- An acknowledgement of another sender's message (feedback)
- An attempt to change the receiver's perceptions or ideas about an issue
- An instruction to the receiver
- An acknowledgement and agreement to an instruction
- A farewell; and so on.

## Sender

The sender is the originator of the message. In discussions about workplace communications, people will be the most likely message senders. You should also note that the increasing flow of information and data coming from machines is a form of communication; it often includes information that the receiver must act upon. This includes instruments and controls, computer printouts, etc.

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### **Remember!**

*The sender is responsible for ensuring the receiver understands the meaning of a message. If the message is not understood, then communication has failed.*

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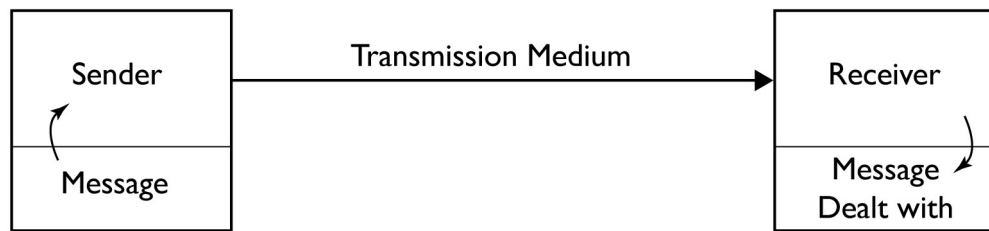
## Channel

The channel is the way that a message is transmitted or passed on to the receiver. People use different channels, depending on the situation. People may communicate by speaking face-to-face (verbal), writing, speaking over a 2-way radio or by telephone, or using pictures or

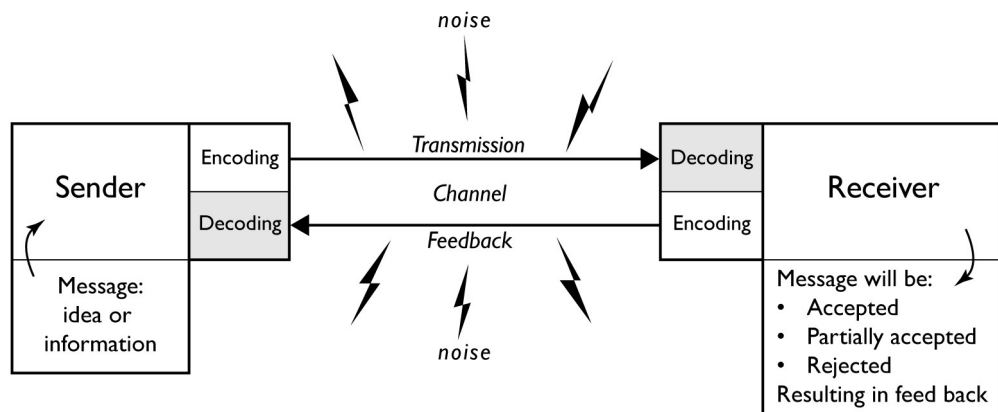
symbols (e.g. roadworks signage). The receiver can only understand the sender’s message if he or she is ‘tuned in’. Both the sender and receiver must be able to identify and understand the channel through which the message passes.

## Receiver

The receiver is the intended recipient of the message. Whenever you send a message you will generally have a receiver or receiver/s in mind. You should also remember that non-intended receivers may see or hear the message and this can create confidentiality problems. This issue will be discussed later in the topic.



In the diagram above, you can see how these elements work together to form a communication — the transmission and reception of a message. This simply shows that a sender decides to pass on some information (a message) to a receiver. The sender creates the message and transmits it to the receiver via a ‘channel’. The channel may be the spoken word, a written instruction, a visual signal or any other means of communication. The receiver receives the message and deals with it. This is essentially the basis of all communication.



In the diagram above, you will see that it shows some additional items that can affect the communication process. The additional items include:

- Noise
- Encoding
- Decoding
- Message accepted, partially accepted or rejected
- Feedback.

These items, and their affect on how a receiver understands a message, are discussed below.

## Noise

‘Noise’ is the name given to anything that can adversely affect or disrupt a message. The noise can be external or can come from within the sender or the receiver. If it affects the quality, sense, or clarity of the message, then it is considered to be ‘noise’. Noise can be a major barrier to communication. Some typical examples of noise are:

- **Actual noise** — trying to converse in a very noisy place can be made so difficult that much of the sense of the conversation is lost. For example, trying to give detailed instructions to a person standing near a grader that has the reversing alarm switched on would make it very difficult for the person to understand many of the details.
- **Distracted receiver** — the receiver is not paying full attention to the sender and the sense of the message is lost.
- **Distracted or unclear sender** — the sender is not concentrating on the message he/she is sending and sends something that is confusing or difficult for the receiver to decode.
- **Mixed messages** — later messages appear to contradict earlier messages creating a situation for the receiver that is difficult to decode.
- **Mishearing/misreading** — these are two common reasons for the failure of messages to get through to the receiver as they were intended. Many words in the English language sound or look similar to others so that it is relatively easy to make mistakes. In fact, the phonetic alphabet (Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, etc) was created specifically to prevent messages transmitted by radio from being misheard.
- **Non-common code used** — for example, a person whose only language was English would not be able to understand a person speaking in Thai. Similarly, a person with no construction background at all might find it difficult to understand technical messages sent by a person who had spent twenty-five years in the industry and talks in construction jargon. A person trying to demonstrate ‘superiority’ by ‘talking over other’s heads’ also runs the risk of being misunderstood through use of a ‘non-common code’.
- **Radio/telephone break-up** — information transmitted electronically is always at risk of break-up and, therefore, the chance that some of the meaning of any given message is lost.
- **Variable literacy skills** — a written message sent to a person who cannot read, or has difficulty with reading, will ensure the message does not fulfill its intended task. Whatever messages you send must be tailored to suit your intended audience.



These are a few of the many possible types of ‘noise’ in communications that can prevent messages being correctly received. The important point is that communications can be disrupted and corrupted by events outside the control of the communicators and by the communicators themselves. Accordingly, the sender and the receiver/s must be aware of that possibility and make sure that messages are sent and received as intended.

## Encoding

Encoding means any process of converting sounds or words into symbols. The alphabet and writing are both types of code, as are traffic lights and safety signs. A code is a way of converting a thought in one person’s head into a form that another person can understand.

## Decoding

Decoding means any process of converting symbols (i.e. codes) back into sounds or words. People decode messages by converting them from a symbol that another person has transmitted into a thought that they can understand.

## Message Accepted/Rejected

On receipt of a message, there are essentially three ways a receiver can respond. These are to:

- accept the message in its entirety
- accept the message partially
- reject the message.

These three outcomes should be fairly self-explanatory. We will examine them more carefully in a later section that deals with barriers to communication.

## Feedback

Feedback is the receiver’s response to the sender. It is the feedback that lets the sender know the message has been received. Feedback may be intentional or unintentional. It is an essential part of the process of interpersonal communication.

Feedback serves a number of purposes:

- it lets the sender know that a message has been received
- it helps to provide continuity to a communication
- it can indicate understanding or lack of understanding of the topic at hand
- it can stimulate further communication
- it can signal the end of the communication.

When we are in face-to-face communication, the feedback occurs naturally as a part of the process. It can be visual or audible. When we use relatively modern methods of

communication such as the telephone and two-way radio, we still provide feedback but it must be done in an audible manner — the receiver cannot see any visual signals. Even so, the audible feedback tends to occur as a natural part of the conversation. When we communicate in written format, we still need to provide feedback. However, in this case the receiver of the initial message must make a positive and conscious effort to provide feedback to the sender. If feedback is not provided, it can represent a significant barrier to communication. This issue will be discussed later in the section that addresses communication barriers.

## Sending Messages

As we have already seen, messages can be transmitted via a number of channels including messages sent by oral, non-verbal or written means. Regardless of the channel used, effective communication requires that the message to be sent is:

- clear
- accurate
- complete
- direct
- relevant

A clear message is one that says exactly what it means to say, without excess words or confusing language. This means that the message is not ambiguous and is not open to misinterpretation. Many words in the English language can be interpreted or defined in different ways. For example, the word ‘drive’ can have a number of different meanings including ‘a road’, ‘a cricket stroke’, ‘ambition’, ‘fund raiser’, etc. So it is important that the meaning is clear within the communication context and further explained and clarified if necessary.

About 85% of face-to-face communication consists of body language (such as facial expressions) and tone of voice; these add meaning to the words people speak. The attitude of the sender becomes very important. These methods cannot be used in written communication. Extra care is needed to ensure the reader receives the correct or intended meaning. For this reason, it is better to avoid sarcasm, irony, or euphemisms in written communications. The meanings of these terms are explained below:

- Sarcasm— The intention to cause pain by using bitter words. Example:
  - If you’re still alive after I finish checking your work... (said by boss to employee)
- Irony— the use of words to suggest a meaning different to what the words actually say. Example:
  - What a happy face! (Said to someone scowling miserably)
- Euphemism— Using pleasant words to describe something that is unpleasant or less desirable. Examples:
  - ‘A senior congregate living community for the chronologically gifted’, instead of old-people’s home

- ‘Disadvantaged’ instead of poverty-stricken
- ‘Outplacement’ instead of getting the sack.

The use of these sorts of words will only confuse others and change the meaning of a message. Using expressions such as ‘manual operative’ can be unnecessarily confusing when the person means ‘labourer’. The best way of avoiding this type of confusion is to ‘call a spade a spade’ — not ‘a hand-held digging implement’.

The sender should also make sure that the message is accurate and complete so that the receiver gets the correct information and can act accordingly. It doesn’t matter how efficient the communication is, if the information provided is the wrong information, is inaccurate or incomplete, then the communication has been ineffective.

In some business situations, a person may act as a ‘gatekeeper’ and only pass on bits and pieces of information. This may be necessary in some cases where people only need to receive the information that is useful to them, however in other cases, it may block effective communication by preventing other employees from receiving the full and accurate information that they need to do their job properly. This form of filtering or blocking of information may be used as a means of exercising personal power and could be against the best interests of the company if it is used to prevent efficient and effective communication.

If the receiver has to guess or infer the meaning of the message, then the meaning has not been stated clearly enough. Rather than implying or hinting at what is meant, the sender should make sure that the message is delivered in an honest and straightforward manner.

Messages should be sent directly to the receiver where possible to avoid distortion or corruption to the meaning and loss of detail as can happen when a message is passed on from person to person. This effect is sometimes known as ‘Chinese whispers’ and can be avoided by sending important information in written form or communicating it directly to the intended receiver.

When sending messages in a business situation, you should always be careful to keep them concise and relevant. The whole system can become overloaded with useless information if people within the organisation are not careful to restrict their communication to messages that are necessary.

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**Note!**

*When trying to communicate clearly and concisely, never make assumptions about how much the knowledge the receiver has of the issue being discussed.*

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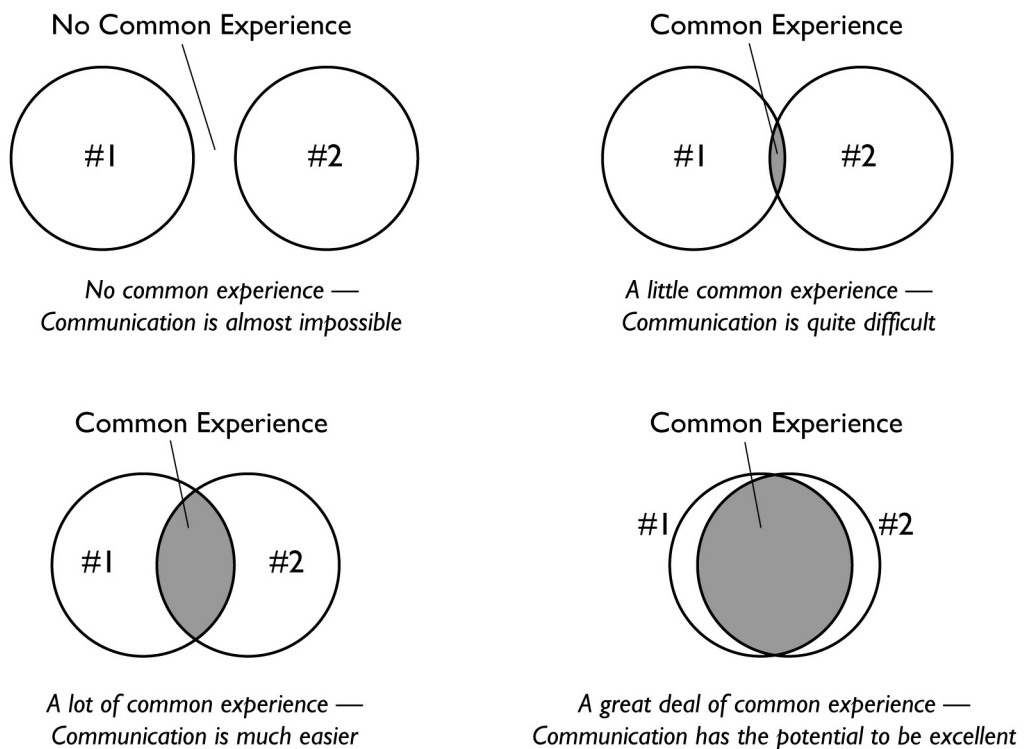
# Receiving Messages

The way we receive messages is just as important as the way we transmit them. If we are not attentive, we can easily receive the message and apply a meaning that was not intended by the sender. Being attentive not only means listening carefully, it also means watching for the non-verbal part of the sender’s message.

For example, a person might say: ‘Oh great, it’s raining’. As we know from experience, this phrase can have at least two possible meanings. The first may be the happy reaction of a farmer who has been experiencing drought conditions and the opposite meaning might be expressed sarcastically by a concreter who has just finished pouring a concrete slab. Tone of voice and also body language signals such as a smile or a frown would be good indicators of the true meaning of the message that the person is sending.

Body language signals are not available when receiving a written message and so both the sender and the receiver need to be more careful in interpreting the message.

# Common Experience



In discussing codes, we mentioned that for a message to have its intended affect upon the receiver, it must be in a code that the receiver is able to decode. The ability to decode a message will be much better when sender and receiver share a lot of common experience. When we deal with others who share our experiences it becomes easier to code and decode messages. The diagram above attempts to show how understanding improves with increased common experience.

What this means in the real world is that people find it easier to communicate with people who have similar language, experience, cultural background, and working life. For example, almost every profession or trade has its own language that can be difficult for outsiders to understand. Some obvious examples are the legal profession, the medical profession, and science. Even people working in the trades and the construction industry develop their own language and jargon which helps their own communication but is difficult for outsiders to understand. This means that when people in the construction industry are talking to outsiders or new starters, they need to be careful that they are phrasing their conversations in a way that is easy for others to understand.

## Tone

The tone or way in which a message is pitched carries a lot of information about the sender's intentions and mood. For example, the sender of the message can create a tone that may be:

- Formal
- Informal
- Friendly
- Unfriendly
- Officious
- Humorous
- Light-hearted
- Angry, etc.

The tone or emotion in a message is generally made apparent by the non-verbal part of a communication. The same words can be said a number of different ways and it is the non-verbal part of the communication that makes the difference. This is even true in written communication. The way the words are composed can make a significant difference to how they are received. The same or similar words written in different ways can convey very different moods to the reader.

## Use of Non-discriminatory Terms

It is not acceptable to use discriminatory language when speaking to people or in written material. By being thoughtful about what you write it should be possible to avoid discriminatory language altogether. Sometimes our words or comments can be considered discriminatory on the basis of:

- Gender
- Race
- Age
- Religion
- Educational levels

- Physical ability or disability
- Appearance
- Dress/fashion
- Position within the organisation

Discrimination based on any of the above factors is prohibited in Queensland by the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* and the *Equal Opportunity in Public Employment Act 1992*, and by similar laws in other states and territories.

In the workplace, the most common form of discrimination relates to gender (sex), especially stereotyping. For example, a civil construction textbook may give examples or anecdotes that refer to men only. In the not-too-distant past, this type of work was considered strictly ‘men’s business’; however, both men and women can now choose to work in the construction industry.

For this reason, it is advisable to phrase any written or spoken references to people in the workplace so as to admit the possibility of participation by either gender. The following text gives two examples of how this may be done.

The first example uses plural forms of words, such as ‘they’ and ‘themselves’.

#### Example

Operators must always conduct a pre-start inspection. They should start at the base of the operator steps and work around the bulldozer until all inspection points have been checked and passed as satisfactory. Any operators ignoring this procedure could find themselves driving a bulldozer that is unsafe to operate.

This form of expression may be preferable to the use of combinations such as he/she or himself/herself, which tend to produce a clumsy effect:

The operator must always conduct a pre-start inspection. He/she should start at the base of the operator steps and work around the bulldozer until all inspection points have been checked and passed as satisfactory. Any operator ignoring this procedure could find him/herself driving a bulldozer that is unsafe to operate.

# Non-verbal Communication

Some of the people who study human communication believe that as much as seventy five percent of the sense in a communication is transferred by non-verbal means. Non-verbal communication means anything that is not indicated by words. For example, non-verbal communications can include any of the following:

- Raising or lowering of the voice
- Pauses and gaps in speech
- Facial expressions (smiling, frowning, etc)
- Gestures and pointing
- Body movement and body language
- Distance between the communicators
- Touching (hand-shakes, a pat on the back, etc)
- Using objects as part of the communication
- Sketching on a whiteboard to illustrate a point, and many others.

Most of the non-verbal portion of communication is something that we do subconsciously. In most circumstances this supports the message we want to get across, for example a 'good morning' greeting is often accompanied with a smile. However, difficulties occur when we transmit emotions or feelings that we don't want the receiver/s to be aware of.

For example, we may be angry with an employee because he/she has performed poorly in a given task but we do not want him or her to know that we are angry because we do not want to erode his/her confidence. Another example may be when we have negotiated a contract variation with the client. We feel happy to have obtained the additional funding but we do not necessarily want the client to know this.

In these cases, we have to be very careful to make sure that the non-verbal part of the messages we are sending are in line with what we intend to say and that they carry the feelings we want to transmit.

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### **Remember!**

*It is important to ensure that the verbal and non-verbal parts of the message match each other; otherwise the sender may ignore or misinterpret the message.*

*If a person's words and actions are at odds with each other, it may be an indicator of dishonesty in communication.*

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# The Benefits of Active Listening

Active listening occurs when the listener is actively participating in the conversation and consciously giving all of their attention to the speaker. In doing this, the listener is giving the speaker the opportunity to freely communicate their thoughts and express their feelings without any distractions. The listener encourages the speaker to present their point of view and demonstrates a willingness to understand the way that the speaker feels or thinks.

The listener can also confirm that they have understood the speaker by paraphrasing the message in their own words. This feedback indicates to the speaker that the listener has been paying attention and allows the speaker to then clarify their meaning about any points if necessary.

Active listening leads to better understanding in that more effective and complete communication is likely to occur. There are a number of listening skills that a person can apply to improve their active listening:

- Avoid interrupting the speaker or talking over them
- Show interest in what is being said
- Ask questions and paraphrase the information in your own words if unsure of the meaning
- Use affirmative body language such as eye contact and head nods
- Avoid thinking about other things
- Do not fidget, yawn or otherwise display lack of interest
- Make sure there is time for the conversation; if you are in a hurry, reschedule the discussion.

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**Remember!**

*The sender should always ensure that the receiver has understood the message correctly.*

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# Barriers to Communication and Overcoming Them

A barrier is anything that interferes with or stands in the way of effective communication. These barriers may lead to messages being distorted, delayed or ignored. Barriers may be divided into two main types:

- Physical or external barriers
- Intrapersonal or personality barriers

## Physical Barriers

Some examples of physical barriers that may interfere with communication are:

- Sound — noise from heavy machinery, poor quality telephone line, radio break-up
- Visual — poor lighting, visual distractions, vision impairment
- Access — internet connection not available, no mobile phone reception
- Comfort — ambient temperature too high, lack of space, lack of privacy

## Intrapersonal Barriers

Intrapersonal barriers are barriers that exist within people's own minds and these relate to the personalities of both the sender and the receiver of the message. Some intrapersonal barriers to effective communication and strategies to avoid or minimise these barriers, are listed below:

### *Bias or Prejudice*

People may sometimes not believe or may reject or may misinterpret a message if it is not in accordance with their own feelings or beliefs. The receiver may filter out parts of the message if it does not agree with their preconceived ideas. The message sender can try to overcome this barrier by asking the receiver for feedback and by clarifying the message to ensure that the meaning is clear and unambiguous.

### *No Common Code*

When communicating, people use verbal and non-verbal codes as a means to transmit messages. If the receiver cannot decode the message because, for example, he/she does not speak the same language, cannot interpret symbols or cannot understand technical jargon, then communication will fail. This barrier can be overcome if both the sender and the receiver cooperate to find a common code so that the message can be understood. This may mean that a message has to be translated into another language, symbols may need explanatory notation and the use of jargon is avoided. A number of people in the work force have literacy problems and do not find it easy to read documents. In this situation, it may be best to communicate orally or by demonstration where possible.

### *No Common Channel*

Sometimes communication is unsuccessful because there is no common channel available. For example, a telephone line is unclear due to static, a handwritten note is unreadable or a person is hard of hearing. This type of barrier may be overcome by establishing reliable telephone lines or using alternative means of communication, such as two-way radios or mobile phones. If a handwritten note is not readable then it would be better if the sender typed the message then printed it out or sent it by email. Otherwise he/she could take the time to hand-write it clearly. When trying to communicate with a person who is deaf or partially deaf, it may be necessary to use an alternative channel such as writing, diagrams or signs.

## *No Common Goals*

Communication will be restricted in situations where the sender of a message and the receiver has different viewpoints and goals. This might occur, for example, when a supervisor has to communicate with a person who is protesting about some aspect of the work being undertaken. This barrier may be overcome or at least partially overcome if both parties make an effort to understand the other person's point of view and find some common ground. There are many examples where, in times of crisis, such as a bushfire, people will forget their differences and barriers will disappear as they work together to achieve a common goal. Developing common goals is one of the most important steps towards improving communication in the workplace.

## *Credibility*

In many cases, communication can fail because the person receiving the message does not trust the sender and rejects the information presented. Lack of credibility must be overcome before effective communication can be achieved. This may mean that the sender has to take the time to first establish their position and if necessary provide some evidence of authority. This concern about credibility is most common in telephone conversations but may also occur in written communications. Face-to-face communication is a way of reducing this type of barrier but it is important to ensure that the body language of the person delivering the message supports the verbal message.

## *Message Overload*

Communication may not be effective in situations where the receiver is overloaded with messages, or finds that the message is too large or too complex to interpret. The receiver may put the message aside and deal with other messages that are easier to cope with. If a message is important and needs some priority, the message should include an explanation indicating why it is important, what are the consequences of it not being completed and asking for confirmation that the request will be acted upon promptly. The receiver should be asked to confirm the content of the message as well.