

Topic 7 Section 2

Interpersonal Communication

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Knowing what to Communicate

Communication plays a major role in our working day, as we have previously seen. It is important that we communicate efficiently so that we do not become overloaded or 'bogged down' with an excessive amount of unnecessary conversations, telephone calls emails and meetings. Some information is necessary or need-to-know while other information is less relevant and could be classed as nice-to-know. The free flow of information throughout a business is crucial in organising work and maintaining necessary interaction between workers, clients, contractors and others, so it is important that your time is not wasted on communication that is not relevant and appropriate.

While too much communication can interfere with people's ability to do their job properly, too little communication can be equally as damaging and prevent people from doing their best in achieving their goals at work. For example, a worker who is kept in the dark and not given enough information or feedback about his or her work will probably not perform satisfactorily, lose motivation and become unhappy with their job.



In a business environment, much of the communication that takes place involves sharing of information or factual data. An important part of learning effective communication skills is being able to identify the different types of messages and to be able to use each component to achieve the results that you want. For example, it is often very important that you are readily able to distinguish between information that is factual and information that is opinion, hearsay or assumption.

Factual information or data is usually best transmitted in written form, pictures or drawings, particularly if it contains a lot of information that may need to be referred to and cannot easily be remembered. On the other hand, personal messages may often be better delivered in a face-to-face situation or by telephone.

If you want to deliver a message that is of importance to a person, a letter may be more appropriate than an e-mail. In such contexts, a letter may show that you have taken more time and trouble about the person's request; the message 'between the lines' is that you are interested in or concerned about an issue.



Communication at work also involves people giving opinions, asking questions and issuing orders or instructions. They may also express personal feelings such as their hopes and fears and have social discussions about sport, weather, news, etc. This sort of social chat is important in helping to create a friendly and cohesive workplace. Most communication at work will contain a number of these components.

Knowing when to Communicate

Knowing when to communicate is just as important as knowing what to communicate because timing is often critical in a business situation. For example, a work schedule should be provided to a crew in plenty of time for them to organise the correct tools and equipment to carry out the task. If communication is not timely or it is incomplete, this can lead to frustration and wasted time or effort.

If the purpose of your communication is to simply pass on some general information, then the timing of the message may not matter too much, but there are many other situations where the timing of the communication could be critical in achieving a satisfactory outcome. Some typical examples of situations where timing is important are:

- When to contact a client
- When to raise a grievance with a co-worker
- When to approach the boss for a raise

In general terms, it is better to make an appointment to meet with a client or your boss at a time that suits their schedule rather than try to discuss an important matter 'on the run' in a place and at a time that is inconvenient. Similarly, raising a grievance with a co-worker might best be done at a quiet time when you are alone together rather than at lunchtime when other workers are around. Also, it is often better to raise an important issue with a work crew early in the day when everyone is fresh and alert if it needs their attention and input rather than, say, last thing on a Friday afternoon.

In all of these cases, the key to achieving the best outcome for your communication is to consider the other person's perspective and to ensure that the timing and conditions that you select for the communication to take place are best suited to a successful result.

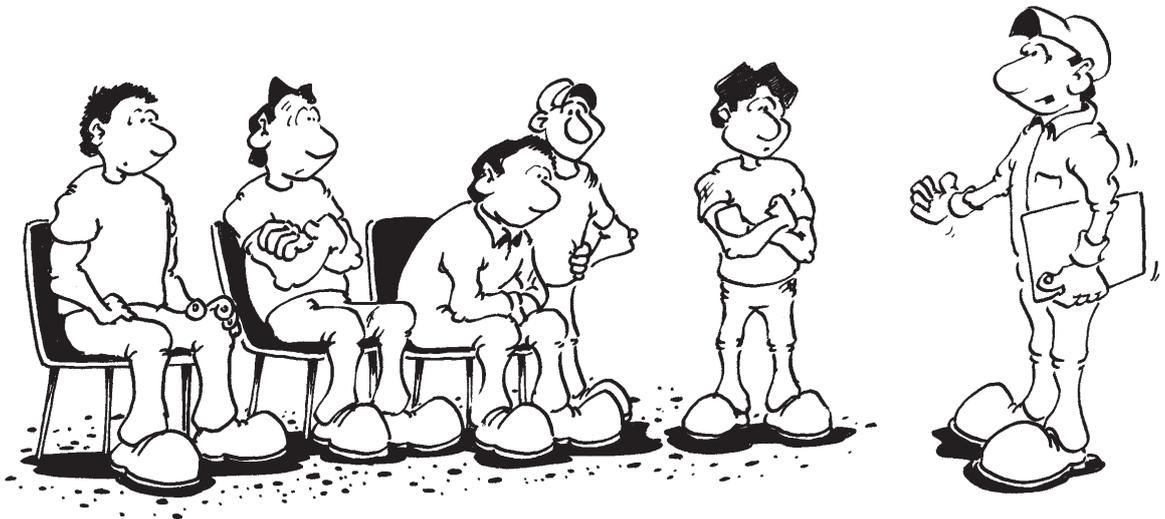
At times, a lack of communication can be as damaging to a business as too much communication. For example, if a supervisor does not take the time to address a problem with a worker at an early stage, the problem may escalate and have much more serious consequences later on. The aim of any business should be to achieve an efficient level of communication that is appropriate and relevant and is provided in a timely manner.



Communicating with Workers

Supervisors will frequently communicate with workers throughout any normal working day. These interactions may be face-to-face or carried out by telephone, two-way radio or email and are usually conducted to:

- Provide job instructions
- Discuss work progress
- Conduct toolbox talks
- Inform workers of policies and procedures
- Provide feedback on performance
- Motivate
- Address any problems



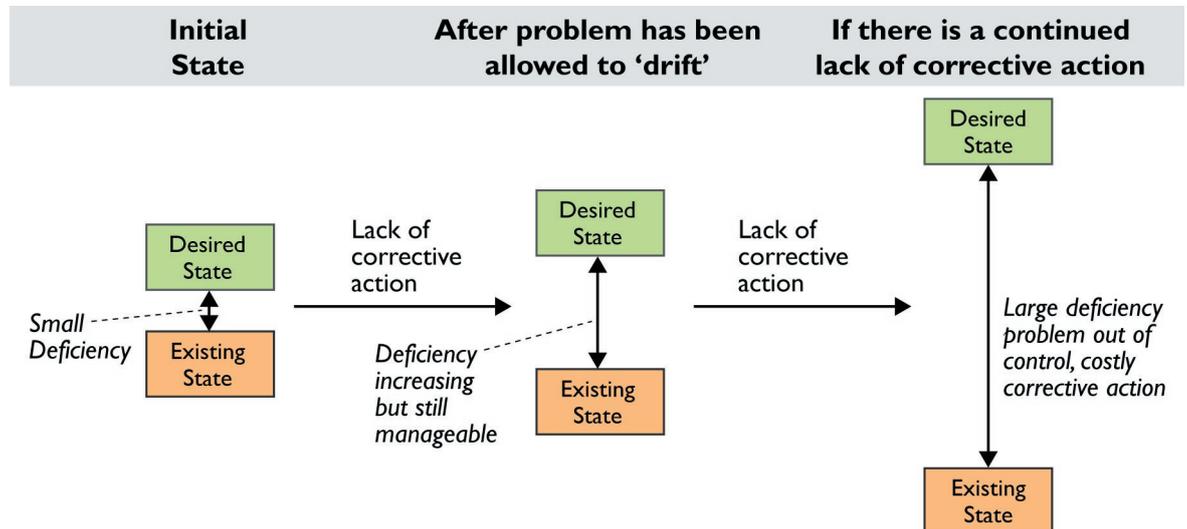
Supervisors should always try to find a balance, in their communication with workers, between providing effective control, maintaining worker motivation and organising work tasks efficiently. Too much control may reduce initiative, decrease job satisfaction and lead to lower productivity whereas too little control may lead to uncertainty and insecurity.

Workers will be more motivated to carry out their tasks efficiently if they have a sense of achievement and get job satisfaction from the work that they do. Supervisors can improve motivation by providing feedback to the worker on his/her performance, by letting them know that their efforts are appreciated and by giving praise where it is due.

It is also important for a worker's job satisfaction that they have a sense of belonging to the organisation. The supervisor can provide information on company goals and activities that will help workers to better understand their role and importance in the company structure.

Problems should be addressed promptly and fully before they have a chance to get out of control. Frequent communication with workers will allow supervisors to become aware of problems at an early stage and also to spot potential problems before they arise. One method of finding out what workers are thinking and feeling is to make sure that you ask open questions such as 'how do you feel about your work?' rather than closed questions such as 'do you enjoy your work?'.

If the person supervising the work cannot communicate with workers, then directions are likely to be misinterpreted and the standard of work will 'drift' away from the desired outcome. The diagram below shows how this can occur, with serious effects on the final outcomes of the job.



Communicating with Managers

One of the roles of a supervisor is to provide information to upper management so that they can keep in touch with workplace developments. In particular, supervisors must communicate regularly with their bosses to:

- Inform them of work progress
- Relay any problems
- Clarify expectations and goals
- Give feedback on worker performance and attitudes
- Get information on company news and activities
- Discuss their own needs and desires

As with any other communication in the workplace, it is important that these matters are addressed in a manner that is both efficient and effective. Communication should be relevant and timely and as much as possible, kept concise. It is also important that information provided to upper management is accurate and complete so that problems are not hidden.

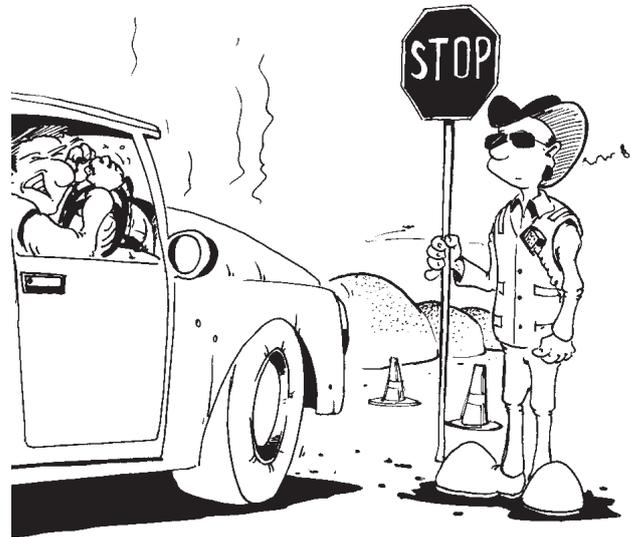
Communicating with the Client

In communicating with the client, you should always remember that you are a representative of the company and be careful to preserve the image of the company as that of a professional organisation. This means that all communication with the client should be conducted in a professional manner. For example, written communications should be well presented and telephone conversations should be polite and helpful.

The main interest of the client is that the work is done according to specification and completed on time and within budget. The supervisor should keep the client informed of progress without getting into excessive detail about minor issues.

Communicating with the Public

Communicating with the public is similar to interacting with clients in that once again the supervisor must be aware of the need to present the company in a professional light. Day-to-day contact with the public should be conducted in a friendly and helpful manner but supervisors should recognise situations where they need to call for assistance from more experienced and trained staff members. This situation might occur, for example, where members of the public become aggressive or threatening.



Raising a Complaint or Matter of Concern

From time-to-time you will identify issues of concern that you believe need to be dealt with by your manager. You have the right to do this but you should remember that your boss has his/her own concerns and workload. Accordingly, you should pick a time that is appropriate and not, for example, when your manager is fully occupied with some other problem. You should then approach your issue of concern in a professional and concise manner. The following step-by-step procedure will help you to get the result you are seeking.

1. Greet your manager in a friendly, open manner.
2. Tell him/her you have a problem with which you would like some advice and assistance.
3. Ask if he/she has time to deal with this problem now.
4. Describe the problem and why it concerns you.
5. Listen carefully to the reply and discuss the situation without hostility.

6. Make constructive suggestions for solving the problem — you should have already considered solutions before you make the approach.
7. If possible, obtain your manager's commitment for the implementation of a solution.
8. If possible, set a date for a review of the situation.
9. Thank your manager for his/her attention and time.

Although it can be difficult to raise problems with your manager, it is much better to deal with the situation than it is to remain silent and become frustrated. Not all problems will be solved in the way you would like but if you raise the issues and gain an understanding of another point of view you will have gone a long way to reducing your own levels of tension and frustration.

When raising problems with your boss, you should remember that as a supervisor you will also be in a position where people raise problems with you. In other words, treat your manager with respect and courtesy. That is, in the same way that you would expect others to treat you.

Handling a Complaint or Matter of Concern

As a supervisor, you will have to deal with complaints or matters of concern and you should always try to be fair and equitable in the way that you handle them. Don't stifle dissent or blame people because they have complained — don't shoot the messenger. It is best to encourage people to be open and allow them to voice their concerns freely. If issues are avoided or dismissed, then there may be frustration and resentment that will damage the harmony and efficiency of the workgroup.

In dealing with a complaint, it is important to:

- Be polite and show respect for the other person's point of view.
- Use good communication skills such as active listening to try to get to the heart of the problem — the cause not the effect.
- Look for common ground in trying to find a solution.
- Try to take the emotion out of the situation.
- Look for a fair, reasonable and workable solution to the problem.
- Seek advice from senior staff if the complaint is outside of your area of responsibility or expertise.



Discussion versus Telling or Giving Orders

One of the main duties of a supervisor is to allocate work to employees that are under his/her supervision. The way that the supervisor communicates these instructions is important in achieving the best outcome. While most Australian workers accept that managers and supervisors have the authority to give instructions, they generally do not like being given orders in an authoritarian or military fashion.

There are times, especially in an emergency, when orders must be given without any explanation or discussion. In general terms, however, it is better to explain work requirements and discuss the best way to achieve work goals efficiently. There are a number of advantages to be gained in using this style of communication:

- More co-operation may be gained in achieving outcomes if common goals have been agreed upon by supervisors and workers
- Workers will be better motivated and will gain more job satisfaction if they have some input into their work activities and are kept informed of the 'big picture'

Worker involvement in decision-making can often lead to better outcomes as a result of their input and knowledge of conditions and work practices.

Meetings

Meetings play a vital role in promoting effective communication in the workplace. Well-organised and well-run meetings can give a supervisor the opportunity to pass on information and receive information from a number of people in an efficient manner. It is usually a more cost-effective means of communication than talking to a number of people individually and has the advantage that everyone is getting the same message at the same time. Meetings also give people the chance to contribute ideas and put forward their point of view. This involvement can increase commitment to decisions taken by the work group and help to improve job satisfaction. There are two main types of meeting — formal and informal.

Formal Meetings

Meetings that need to be structured and documented are conducted in a formal manner according to a set of rules and procedures. A formal meeting might be held, for example, with the local council, clients, the public, etc. The purpose of these meetings may be to:

- Provide information
- Exchange information and get feedback
- Address issues and solve problems
- Make decisions and set goals
- Provide training.

You may be required to attend a range of formal meetings. These may include:

- Site meetings
- Start-up meetings
- Progress meetings.

Formal meetings must be planned and organised carefully to ensure that maximum benefit is gained from the time spent in the meeting. There is often a high financial cost involved in taking a number of people away from their jobs for the period of the meeting and this cost should be weighed up against the benefits to be gained. In addition, if people are invited to a meeting that they later decide was a waste of their time, there may be negative results other than cost, such as, loss of credibility and loss of confidence in the people or the company that organised the meeting.

A formal meeting should follow the general principles listed below:

- The meeting should have a clearly defined purpose and have identified actions, goals or outcomes.
- Nominate a chairperson and secretary to run the meeting.
- Organise a time and venue for the meeting — make sure that the time, venue and conditions are suitable for the participants.
- Invite participants to the meeting, making sure that they have an interest or reason for attending.
- Set a meeting agenda and distribute it to participants so that they can prepare for the meeting.
- Encourage good communication practices such as active listening and use strategies to avoid communication barriers.
- Use problem-solving techniques where appropriate to resolve issues.

The Chairperson

The role of the chairperson is to:

- Co-operate with the secretary to plan the meeting, set the agenda and organise the meeting details.
- Ensure that the meeting has a quorum, that is, the minimum number of participants that are required to make the meeting official (according to meeting rules) or worthwhile.
- Open the meeting, welcome attendees and guests and state the purpose of the meeting.
- Guide the meeting and make sure that it follows company procedures, rules and conventions.
- Maintain control and keep the meeting on track so that discussion is focused on the agenda items and the order of business is maintained.
- Be aware of time limitations so that all agenda items are covered but give

priority to important items — use time efficiently.

- Encourage involvement by trying to bring all participants into the discussion.
- Be objective and impartial in running the meeting.
- Deal with any disagreements or conflict that may arise.
- If decisions are to be made then make sure that agreement is reached or a vote is taken so that an outcome is achieved.
- When action is needed, make sure that the minutes identify clearly what action is to be taken, who is to take action and what is the time frame for completion.
- Ensure that all of the meeting goals or outcomes are achieved. Adjourn business to the next meeting if there is insufficient time to complete it.
- Determine the date, time and place of the next meeting.
- Thank participants for their contribution and close the meeting.
- Check that the meeting minutes are correctly recorded by the secretary and sign them.

The Secretary

In general terms, the secretary is the person who deals with all of the paperwork involved in organising a meeting. The role of the secretary is to:

- Organise the meeting and prepare the agenda in consultation with the chairperson. The agenda should include:
 - Meeting date, time and place
 - Purpose of meeting
 - Agenda items and order of business
 - Distribution list
- Distribute the agenda before the meeting so that attendees have time to prepare.
- After the chairperson has opened the meeting, read the minutes of the last meeting and move that the minutes be accepted as true and correct. Ask for someone who was at the last meeting to second the motion.
- Record the details of the meeting clearly and concisely in the minutes, including:
 - a list of attendees
 - apologies from people who were unable to attend
 - all correspondence both incoming and outgoing and business arising from correspondence

- a brief summary of discussion on agenda items, conclusions reached and decisions made
- any proposals, motions or decisions made
- details of motions including record the name of persons who moved, seconded or amended the motion
- details of next meeting.
- Write up the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting — check any doubtful issues with the chairperson and amend if necessary.
- Get the chairperson to sign the minutes as being complete and correct after checking.
- Distribute the minutes to all attendees of the meeting.

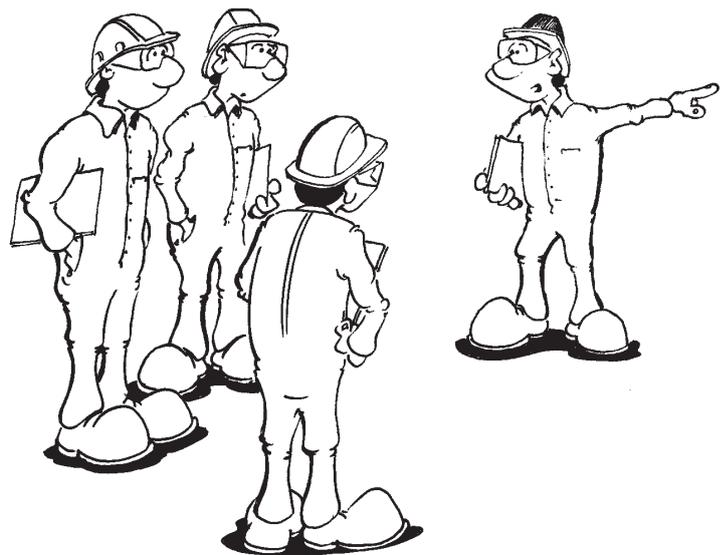
Informal Meetings

Meetings that are held in a more relaxed or less-structured manner are described as informal meetings. While informal meetings do not follow the strict meeting procedures and conventions that formal meetings do, it is still important that they are well planned, organised and conducted efficiently and that the meeting details are accurately recorded. A record should be kept of the meeting time, place, names of those who attended and details of items discussed and any action that was agreed upon. This is because informal meetings still involve considerable cost in terms of the time and effort expended in setting them up. Some examples of this type of meeting are:

- Toolbox meetings
- Job meetings
- Team meetings
- Pre-start meeting.

Toolbox Meetings

These meetings are usually held at the work site and can address a number of issues such as safety issues, procedures, work practices or changes. Toolbox meetings are an effective means of passing on information, making decisions or dealing with issues promptly and can also be used to deliver brief training sessions.



Job Meetings

These meetings are held to inform workers and sub contractors of job allocations, schedules and responsibilities as well as to set goals or targets. By providing this type of information at a meeting such as this, workers will not only learn details of their own tasks but will also be aware of the jobs that others are responsible for. Discussion and feedback from these meetings can help the supervisor to avoid and clarify any confusion or misunderstandings. Involving workers and subcontractors in the decision-making process can help to increase their commitment to the decisions agreed upon and improve job satisfaction.

Team Meetings

Group meetings may be held on a regular basis to discuss issues that affect the work teams. These meetings may be used to talk about general work issues, brainstorm better ways to do things, solve problems or to resolve conflict within the group. These meetings can be used to pass on relevant information about company developments and help workers to understand their role in the 'big picture'. Team meetings can also be used to discuss safety issues or deliver training sessions.

Pre-Start Meetings

In many cases, the parties to the construction contract reach agreement on administrative and technical procedures at an informal meeting—for example, between the superintendent, resident engineer and contractor's representative. There is an option to hold a formal pre-start conference, as described in Topic 4. This is common where government contracts are involved. However, where the work is being performed for a private owner (e.g. in a residential subdivision), the informal meeting is usually considered adequate.

Section 2 – Assessment Activities

For information on how these assessment activities may be used as part of the learning process, see the section on ‘Assessment’ in the ‘Topic Descriptor’ section at the front of this topic.

Theory Questions

The following questions allow you to assess your progress in understanding the material presented in Section 2. The questions may be of any of the following types:

- multiple choice (identify correct answer or answers)
- multiple choice (identify incorrect answer or answers)
- fill in the gaps in a sentence or statement
- identify a sentence or statement as TRUE or FALSE
- write a few sentences or a short paragraph.

Answers to the question are shown in the separate ‘Answer’ section.

Question 1

Name three methods of communication that a supervisor may use to communicate with other personnel during a normal working day.

- _____
- _____
- _____

Question 2

Besides content, what is the other important issue that affects the effectiveness of interpersonal communication?

Question 3

A member of the work crew approaches the construction supervisor at around 3.15 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. He says that he has a major personal issue with another worker on site and would like to talk about it. Which of the following is more likely to be the appropriate, initial response for the supervisor to give?

- I think that what you're saying is important, but now is not the time to talk about it.
- Just knock off at 4 p.m. like everyone else, go home and forget it.
- We need to discuss and deal with this issue properly. Would you like to have a meeting about it on Monday morning?
- We've got to finish No. 2 culvert before we go home this afternoon. Stop wasting time and get back to work.

Question 4

Indicate whether you think that the following statements are true (T) or false (F):

- In dealing with a complaint, it is important to be polite and show respect for the other person's point of view. ()
- Supervisors should always take the time to discuss work activities with workers rather than simply giving an order. ()
- Meetings are an efficient way of communicating a message to a number of people so that they all get the same message at the same time. ()

Question 5

Indicate whether you think that the following statements are true (T) or false (F):

In a formal meeting, the secretary is responsible for:

- Distributing the meeting agenda ()
- Controlling the meeting ()
- Reading out minutes of last meeting ()
- Recording details of any decisions that are made ()

Practical Exercises

Practical Exercise 1

Next time you attend a meeting, consider the following:

- Was it a formal or informal meeting?
- What was your role in the meeting? (e.g. chairperson, secretary)
- How long did the meeting last?
- Did you consider the meeting worthwhile? Why? Why not?
- What improvements could have been made?