LEARNING OUTCOMES

When you finish studying the material in this chapter, you should be able to:

✓ recognise what influences the perceptual process
✓ describe perception in terms of the social information processing model
✓ identify and explain two implications of social perception
✓ explain the central models explaining attribution
✓ discuss how the self-fulfilling prophecy is created and how it can be used to improve individual and group productivity
✓ describe the perceptual process model of communication
✓ describe the barriers to effective communication
✓ demonstrate your familiarity with oral, written and non-verbal communication skills
✓ discuss the primary sources of listener comprehension
✓ contrast the communication styles of assertiveness, non-assertiveness and aggressiveness
✓ discuss the patterns of hierarchical communication and ‘the grapevine’
✓ explain the contingency approach to media selection
✓ elaborate on information overload and how to deal with it effectively
You have one colleague who embarrassingly bursts into tears rather too often in your opinion. Another colleague withdraws from confrontation at every opportunity, something which eventually drives you crazy. You are sick and tired of the good-looking smooth-talker from the accountancy department who tells tall tales and whose anti-gay talk the other day just confirmed everyone’s suspicions that he might have something to hide. Worst of all is the ‘boss from hell’ who yells all the time and includes the f-word in every sentence, as if his annoyance needs to be emphasised. It is enough to make you think about giving in your notice.

But these tiresome acquaintances are not in your workplace. They are appearing almost nightly on various channels throughout Europe – including the UK, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Italy and Spain – in some version of ‘reality TV’ programmes where handsome (more or less) young men and women are brought together to compete, with one voted out in each show.

When this type of show was launched, critics assumed it would be sex appeal that guaranteed its audience. In fact, we have been amazed to see the chilling way in which a randomly selected group of people set about destroying one another under the gentle guise of mutual co-operation. Sex remains an element in some shows but many have appeared where the point of interest seems to be participant’s constant manoeuvring to gain advantage in the voting, whether it is between themselves or involves the viewers.

The reality melodramas being played out in front of millions of people – and talked about by millions more that admit watching the programme – is frightening for its alarming similarity to the world in which we all live. Home, school, college and work are social environments in which we can often identify relatives, friends or colleagues whose embodiment we now see on our TV screens. Even more alarming is that these shows seem to be aimed at young people, who may or may not be able to distinguish the real world from the fiction of reality TV.

This is the ‘ambulance effect’, explains Professor Cary Cooper, one of Britain’s leading specialists in organisational and industrial psychology. ‘You see potential disaster and you want to look. The biggest similarity of all, that Big Brother possesses, is to a workplace. After all, they are working, even if they do not do much, and also they are very competitive.’

‘Work is just like a game; some people get promotion, some people get rejected and some people who don’t get promoted will leave. We’re learning from Big Brother who is perceived by others to be worthwhile and who will be retained.’

‘That’s just like the office. People chat at the coffee machine and talk about other people and their relationships. They make assumptions about colleagues and bosses. They wonder how they can make themselves more popular. They spread gossip. But this programme actually allows you to hear the rumours firsthand.’

However, in the reality TV setting – like too many workplaces – there is a much more sinister objective lurking beneath much of the residents’ conversational veneer. Each is jockeying for someone else to be ditched but at the same time they want to be liked.

‘Big Brother [and similar shows] shows us an environment where people are uncomfortable with their roles’, said Angela Ishmael of the Industrial Society. ‘It’s exactly what’s happening in lots of workplaces. When professionals aren’t able to manage relationships in a team, team power takes over. It is a classic bullying scenario too, and it is becoming more and more common.’

‘It’s interesting how viewers form a certain picture of the people taking part in the programme. One person is marked as dishonest for not being open about plotting to get other people thrown out’, said Ishmael. ‘But he is quite genuine in terms of his feelings for his colleagues.’
In every social situation, we gather information on others. We form a certain picture of people based on the signals we receive from them. We encode and store this information and use it every time we interact with each other or make a decision in our lives. In fact, we are constantly striving to make sense of our social surroundings, be it when watching a political conversation on TV (or the more commonly found reality show or soap opera), when having a romantic dinner or when dealing with everyday tasks at work.

The resulting knowledge influences our behaviour and helps us navigate our way through life. For example, think of the perceptual process that occurs when meeting someone for the first time. Your attention is drawn to the individual’s physical appearance, mannerisms, actions and reactions to what you say and do. You ultimately arrive at conclusions based on your perceptions of this social interaction. That brown-haired, green-eyed individual turns out to be friendly and fond of outdoor activities. You further conclude that you like this person and then ask him or her to go to a concert, calling the person by the name you stored in memory.

This reciprocal process of perception, interpretation and behavioural response also applies at work. Might employees’ perceptions of how much an organisation valued them affect their behaviour and attitudes? Researchers asked samples of high school teachers, brokerage-firm clerks, manufacturing workers, insurance representatives and police officers to indicate their perception of the extent to which their organisation valued their contributions and their well-being. Employees who perceived that their organisation cared about them reciprocated with reduced absenteeism,
increased performance, innovation and positive work attitudes. This study illustrates the importance of employees’ perceptions.

Perception is not only important in organisational life. Perception theories are widely applied in politics, the media, by recruitment advertisements and in many other instances. Take bonuses for bankers. Following the financial crisis which began in 2008, and saw many large banks and insurance companies nationalised or bankrupt, the use of very large bonuses has become even more controversial than it was, with some politicians calling for an outright ban on the practice. One perception associated with the bonuses is that they contributed to the crisis. Whether it is in fact correct is less important and the financial crisis is not the subject in any case.

Perception is about how individuals understand the information they receive or register using their eyes, nose, ears, fingertips or any other sensory organ. That information comes from somewhere. The state of nature is one thing, but more importantly, the information packages which arrive at the recipient or perceiver depends on how it gets to the recipient and therefore on both the sender and on the transmission. These latter stages of the information process are often called communication.

This chapter deals with both sides of the information flow. On the perceiving side we focus on the antecedents of perception, on the social information processing model and some of the implications. On the communication side we focus on the process of communicating, the forms it takes and the barriers to making it work as intended. We integrate the two sides of the information flow in a discussion of how the distribution of information matters a great deal, whether it is asymmetric or not.

4.1 Factors influencing perception

Perception is a cognitive process that enables us to interpret and understand our environment. It involves the way we view the world around us and adds meaning to the information gathered via the five senses. The study of how people perceive one another is called social cognition. Social perception is the process by which people come to understand one another.

We all perceive the world around us differently. These perceptions influence our current and future behaviour. For instance, running four kilometres in 25 minutes is perceived as a piece of cake for somebody who is used to running marathons, while an untrained person is going to perceive it as a formidable task. If one person during a summer day perceives that it is thirsty weather, he is going to have an extra drink. If a person standing beside him does not share that impression, that person is probably not going to have an extra drink. Different sets of people may also diverge in perceptions. For example, entrepreneurial-minded people have lower risk perceptions associated with starting up new ventures compared to less entrepreneurial people. Human behaviour and thus organisational behaviour are a function of how we perceive our surroundings.

To improve our insights in other people’s behaviour we need to understand how perceptions operate. Understanding and studying the perceptions of other people improves our ability to understand the meaning of our own behaviour. For example, in a study about the perceived attractiveness of job ads, business students were asked to analyse job descriptions. The results showed that the combination of perceived proximity of work to home with challenging job features were the most attractive job characteristics influencing the readiness to apply for a job. So, organisations wishing to attract strong candidates from this labour pool should mention these features when drawing up job ads.
In understanding the process of social perception we need first to learn which factors actually affect perception. These factors can be classified in three main categories as shown in Figure 4.1.

### 4.2 Features of perceived people, objects and events

The characteristics of perceived objects, people and events are of great importance in the formation of perceptions. When a person looks at other people, objects or events, his interpretation is influenced by the features of the perceived target. For instance, a priest dressed as a biker and driving a Harley Davidson will draw more attention than the regular small-town priest. First impressions about people are influenced in a subtle way by a person’s skin colour, gender, hair colour, weight, clothes, and so on. For instance, the perception of people is often influenced by the colour of their clothes. An inquiry found that crime suspects were perceived as more violent and aggressive when dressed in black – a colour associated with demonic, evil sects and death – than when they wore lighter clothing. The answer was that our minds perceive objects, people and ideas as organised and meaningful patterns rather than as separate bundles of data. When you play a melody of six notes and thereupon employ six new notes (but in the same sequence), you recognise the same melody despite the change in notes. There is something else other than the six notes by themselves, a seventh something, which made it possible to recognise the melody despite the change. That objects are perceived as a whole instead as the summation of their constituents is well illustrated by Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3. Even though the dots in the Figure 4.2 are...
4.2 FEATURES OF PERCEIVED PEOPLE, OBJECTS AND EVENTS

Figure 4.2 Closure Principle

Figure 4.3 Perception of a Target as a Whole
not joined together we still perceive them as a circle. In Figure 4.3 we perceive a dog instead of a large number of spots.

Several principles of perceptual grouping explain why we perceive objects as well-organised patterns rather than separate component parts. **Perceptual grouping** is the tendency to form individual stimuli into a meaningful pattern. The main factors that determine perceptual grouping are continuity, closure, proximity, and similarity.10

**Continuity** is the tendency to perceive objects as continuous patterns. This principle, however, can have negative effects. An inflexible manager may demand that his employees follow strict procedures when doing their jobs, even though random activity may solve problems more imaginatively.

**Closure** is the tendency to perceive objects as a constant overall form. The dots looking like a circle in Figure 4.2 illustrate this organisation principle. Closure applies when we tend to see complete shapes even when a part of the information is missing. As a result, vital decisions are often taken on the basis of incomplete information.

**Proximity** is the organisation principle in which elements are grouped together on the basis of their nearness. People working in a department are often seen as a unit. When several people leave the department, however, for different unrelated reasons, the HR department may still perceive that there is a problem in that department and try to determine what it is.

**Similarity** is the tendency to group objects, people and events that look alike. In some organisations each department has its own colour to visually define separate functions. For instance, the sales department has yellow painted doors, while the marketing department has green painted doors, so they are clearly distinct.

**The setting**

The setting in which the interaction between perceiver and the perceived target (i.e. person, object or event) takes place, influences the perception. An important reason is that perceived targets are not looked at in isolation, the relationship of the target to its background or setting also influences perception.

A nice illustration of this phenomenon is the contrast effect. A **contrast effect** is the tendency to perceive stimuli that differ from expectations as being even more different than they really are.11 Imagine that you have been presented with three iron plates – a cold, a warm and a plate at room temperature. After placing your left hand on the cold plate, and right hand on the hot plate, you place both hands simultaneously on the third plate. Even though both hands are placed on the same plate, the right hand will feel cold while the left will sense a warmer feeling. Such a contrast effect often appears in a personnel selection context. For example, the selection of the person to hire from three job applicants might depend on their interview performance. The first and the last applicant are perceived as having performed excellently in the interview while the second one is assessed as weak because of the comparison with the first and the last applicant. However, when the applicants before and after the second applicant are assessed as weak performers, these same selection administrators perceive the second applicant as very good. (This is one more reason to use other selection methods as well as interviews.)

Another significant situational characteristic refers to the impact of culture. In Japan, social context is very important and business conversations after working hours or at lunch is taboo. If you try to talk business during these times, you may be perceived as crude.12 Similarly, jumping traffic lights, even when there is no traffic, will not be appreciated in a rule-based country such as Germany or Switzerland. In rule-based or ‘universalist’ cultures there is a strong tendency to
oppose behaviour that deviates from the rule. Such cultures are anxious for the reason that once you start to make exceptions for illegal behaviour the system will surely fail. In relationship-based or 'particularist' cultures there exists a strong emphasis on the exceptional nature of present circumstances. When a person has done something wrong, that person will not be perceived as a citizen but as a friend, sister, husband, wife, and a person with unique importance to the perceiver. When business is taking place between firms from different cultures, each will think each other corrupt. Universalists will perceive a particularist as lacking trustworthiness because they only help friends, while particularists perceive universalists as not trustworthy because of the perceived fact that universalists do not even help friends. Culture is further discussed in Chapter 12.

A third contextual factor distorting perceptions is the primacy effect. If you meet an individual for the first time and he is accompanied by someone you admire, your judgement of that person will probably be positive. This perception will however be reversed when someone you dislike accompanies that person. So the primacy effect is the effect by which the information first received often continues to colour later perceptions of individuals. This effect is closely related to the cognitive bias or decision bias known as anchoring.

The perceiver

The characteristics of the perceiver are also important. Factors inherent to the perceiver are sometimes the underlying reason why the same event, person or object is perceived differently. Previous research found that when people are asked to describe a group of target individuals, there is typically more overlap between the various descriptions provided by the same perceiver than there is between those provided for the same target. For example, listening to a friend describing the personality of a mutual acquaintance may tell us more about our friend’s personality than the personality of the person being described. Part of the reason for these differences among perceivers is that we tend to use ourselves as a standard in perceiving others.

Besides personality (also see Chapter 2), gender could also be responsible for differences in perception. For example men and women seem to have a different perception of which social-sexual behaviours they consider to be harassment, while women perceived greater gender inequity favouring males than did men. Gender differences and sexual harassment influence the organisational climate (see Chapter 9).

A perceiver’s mood can influence the impression formed about others. We think differently depending on whether we are in an optimistic or a pessimistic mood. When we are happy and an employee’s task performance needs to be judged, we tend to assess this person’s performance more positively than when we are in an unhappy state.

Perception is also influenced when people have implicit personality theories about which physical characteristics, personality traits and behaviours are related to others. Implicit personality theories are a network of assumptions that we hold about relationships among various types of people, traits and behaviours. Knowing that someone has one trait leads us to infer that they have other traits as well. For example knowing that someone is an entrepreneur leads us to infer that this person is a risk-taker, recognises opportunities and is full of confidence.

Previous learning and experience might influence the impressions formed about objects, people or events. We sometimes see what we expect to see based on previous learning and experience. As a consequence, formed perceptions are very powerful and resistant to non-corroborating information. Thus, people have the tendency to seek and interpret information that verifies existing beliefs. This tendency is called the confirmation bias.
4.3 A social information-processing model of perception

Social perception involves a four-stage information-processing sequence. Figure 4.4 illustrates the basic model. Three of the stages in this model – selective attention/comprehension, encoding and simplification, and storage and retention – describe how specific social information is observed and stored in memory. The fourth and final stage, retrieval and response, involves turning mental representations into real world judgements and decisions.

Keep the following everyday example in mind as you read about the four stages of social perception.

**Example**

Suppose you were thinking of taking a course in, say, personal finance. You can choose between three lecturers who teach parallel sections of the same course, using different types of instruction and testing procedures. Through personal experience, you have come to prefer good lecturers who rely on the case method of instruction and essay tests. According to social perception theory, you would be most likely to arrive at a decision regarding which lecturer to select in the following way.

**Stage 1: Selective attention/comprehension**

People are constantly bombarded by physical and social stimuli in the environment. Since they do not have the mental capacity to fully comprehend all this information, they selectively perceive subsets of environmental stimuli. **Attention**, the process of becoming consciously aware of something or someone, plays a role. Attention can be focused on information either from the environment or from memory. When you sometimes find yourself thinking about totally unrelated

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**Critical thinking**

When you meet new people, how important is your first impression of them – and is your perception accurate?
events or people while reading a textbook, your memory is the focus of your attention. People tend to pay attention to salient stimuli.

Something is salient when it stands out from its context. For example, a competitor in the Scottish Highland Games caber (or pole) tossing event would certainly be salient in a women’s aerobics class (even if he wears a kilt), but not at the annual ‘Highland Games’ in Edinburgh, Scotland. Social salience is determined by several factors (also see Figure 4.1), including:

- **Novelty** (the only person in a group of that race, gender, hair colour or age).
- **Brightness** (wearing a yellow shirt).
- **Unusual for that person** (behaving in an unexpected way, such as a person with a fear of heights climbing a steep mountain).
- **Unusual for a person’s social category** (such as a company president driving a motorcycle to work).
- **Unusual for people in general** (driving 30 km/h in a 90 km/h zone).
- **Extremely positive** (a noted celebrity) or **negative** (the victim of a bad traffic accident).
- **Dominant in the visual field** (sitting at the head of the table).

A person’s needs and goals often dictate which stimuli are salient. For a driver whose petrol gauge shows empty, a Shell or BP sign is more salient than a McDonald’s or Pepsi sign. The reverse would be true for a hungry and thirsty driver with a full petrol tank. Moreover, people have a tendency to pay more attention to negative than to positive information. This leads to a negativity bias. This bias helps explain the ‘gawking factor’ that slows traffic to a crawl following a car accident.

**Example**

*Your search for the ‘right’ personal finance lecturer begins by asking friends who have taken classes from the lecturers. You also may interview the various lecturers who teach the class in order to collect more information. Returning to Figure 4.4, all the information you obtain represents competing environmental stimuli labelled A to F. Because you are concerned about the method of instruction, testing procedures, and past grade distributions, information in those areas is particularly salient to you. You can then proceed to the second stage of information processing. Competing stimuli (e.g. represented by lines B, D and E in Figure 4.4) fail to get your attention and are discarded from further consideration.*

**Stage 2: Encoding and simplification**

Observed information is not stored in the memory in its original form. Encoding takes place; raw information is interpreted or translated into mental representations. To accomplish this, perceivers assign pieces of information to cognitive categories. By category we mean a number of objects that are considered equivalent. Categories are generally designated by names, such as dog, animal. People, events and objects are interpreted and evaluated by comparing their characteristics with information contained in a schema (or, if plural, schemata).

According to social information processing theory, a schema represents a person’s mental picture or summary of a particular event or type of stimulus. For example, if you have eaten in a restaurant more than a few times, your schema of this type of event might involve a number of
distinct elements: you enter, and wait for a waiter to take you to your table. A menu is presented, food and drinks are ordered; drinks arrive, and food is served, in one or more rounds or courses. Eventually you signal to the waiter, with a hand signal that might indicate writing with a pen, and the bill is presented. For the regular restaurant eater, there are endless variations to the basic schema: ordering the wine; having it brought to the table and shown to the guest; and having the waiter uncork it and pouring a small sample for the customer to taste. Even the unspoken part of this ritual is a schema: if the wine does not taste as the customer thinks it should, the implicit assumption is that the bottle can be declared ‘off’, sent back and not paid for. For most eaters, this is a schema rarely used. On one continent at least, waiters are forever asking ‘how is everything?’ and topping up customers’ glasses of ice water, which is too cold to drink.

Cognitive-category labels are needed to make schemata meaningful. The next activity illustrates this by asking you to rate the comprehensiveness of a schema both without and with its associated category label. Take a moment now to complete this activity.

We use the **encoding** process to interpret and evaluate our environment. Interestingly, this process can result in differing interpretations and evaluations of the same person or event. Varying interpretations of what we observe occur for many reasons. First, people possess different information in the schemata used for interpretation. For instance, male chief executive officers (CEOs) and female executives disagree in their assessment of barriers preventing women from advancing to positions of corporate leadership. Second, our moods and emotions influence our focus of attention and evaluations (see Chapter 3). 25 Third, people tend to apply recently used cognitive categories during encoding. For example, you are more likely to interpret a neutral behaviour exhibited by a lecturer as positive if you were recently thinking about positive categories and events. 26 Fourth, individual differences influence encoding. Pessimistic or depressed individuals, for instance, tend to interpret their surroundings more negatively than optimistic and happy people (see Chapter 3). 27 The point is that we should not be surprised when people interpret and evaluate the same situation or event differently. Researchers are currently trying to identify the host of factors that influence the encoding process.

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**Activity**

**Does a schema improve the comprehension of written material?**

**Instructions**

The purpose of this case is to demonstrate the role of schema in encoding. First read the passage shown below. Once done, rate the comprehensiveness of what you read using the scale provided. Next, examine the schema label presented in note 35 section at the end of the chapter. With this label in mind, re-read the passage, and rate its comprehensiveness. Then think of an explanation of why your ratings changed. You will then have just experienced the impact of schema in encoding.

**Read this passage**

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere
Example (continued)

Having collected the relevant information about the three personal finance lecturers and their approaches, you compare this information with other details contained in the schemata. This leads you to form an impression and evaluation of what it would be like to take a course with each lecturer. In turn, the relevant information is passed along to the third stage of information processing.

Stage 3: Storage and retention

This phase involves storage of information in long-term memory. Long-term memory is like an apartment building consisting of separate units connected to one another. Although different people live in each apartment, they sometimes interact. In addition, large apartment complexes have different wings (such as A, B and C). Long-term memory similarly consists of separate but related categories. Like the individual apartments inhabited by unique residents, the connected categories contain different types of information. Information also passes between these categories. Finally, long-term memory is made up of three compartments (or wings) containing categories of information about events, semantic materials and people.

The event memory compartment is composed of categories containing information about both specific and general events. These memories describe appropriate sequences of events in well-known situations, such as going to a restaurant (refer back to Table 4.1), going to a job interview, going to a food store or watching a football match.

Semantic memory refers to general knowledge about the world. In doing so, it functions as a mental dictionary of concepts. Each concept contains a definition (such as a good leader) and associated traits (outgoing), emotional states (happy), physical characteristics (tall) and behaviours (works hard). Just as there are schemata for general events, concepts in semantic memory...
are stored as schemata. Categories within the person memory compartment contain information about a single individual (your supervisor) or groups of people (managers).

**Example (continued)**
As the time draws near for you to decide which personal finance lecturer to take, your schemata of them are stored in the three categories of long-term memory. These schemata are available for immediate comparison and/or retrieval.

**Stage 4: Retrieval and response**
People retrieve information from memory when they make judgements and decisions. Our ultimate judgements and decisions are either based on the process of drawing on, interpreting and integrating categorical information stored in long-term memory or on retrieving a summary judgement that was already made.²⁸

**Example (continued)**
It is course registration day and you have to choose which lecturer to take for your personal finance course. After retrieving from memory your schemata-based impressions of the three lecturers, you select the one who, in accordance with your preferences, uses the case method and gives essay tests. In contrast, you may choose your preferred lecturer by simply recalling the decision you made two weeks ago.

**Evidence about social cognition**
Social cognition is the window through which we observe, interpret and prepare our responses to people and events. A wide variety of activities, organisational processes and quality-of-life issues are thus affected by perception, including managerially crucial activities such as hiring and performance appraisal.

There is clear evidence that decisions are influenced by social cognition. For example, more attractive men and women were hired over less attractive applicants with equal qualifications.²⁹ Similarly, a study of the perception of diversity in the workplace revealed that people pretended to be rarely influenced by sex differences when hiring new employees. Age played a more important role: younger people preferred younger people; older respondents opted for their contemporaries. In traditional environments people chose more traditionally: ethnic minorities and [known] homosexuals had less chance of being recruited.³⁰ Social cognition matters not only when hiring new people into an organisation.

Evaluating or appraising the performance of existing staff is an integral part of management (Chapters 5 and 6 explains why it matters with respect to motivation). For example, a recent study of 166 production employees indicated that they had greater trust in management when they perceived that the performance appraisal process provided accurate evaluations of their performance.³¹

**Application of social cognition**
Some organisations hire new employees based on interviews, among other things (refer to Chapter 2 for information on personality and cognitive ability as hiring criteria). Sometimes much reliance
is placed on interviews. This, however, is a risky approach which depends on two sets of perceptions. One is how the interviewer perceives the interviewee; the other is how the interviewer perceives the requirements of the position to be filled.

The information obtained by interview may be compromised by any number of mental models or schemata held by the interviewer; for example, notions about what a specific job involves and the skills or traits necessary to carry out the job. Some schemata related to characteristics such as sexual orientation, ethnic origin or political orientation may be irrelevant to hiring a good candidate and may also lead to illegal hiring decisions.

On the positive side, however, a recent study demonstrated that interviewer training can reduce the use of invalid schemata. Training improved interviewers’ ability to obtain high-quality, job-related information and to stay focused on the interview task. Trained interviewers provided more balanced judgements about applicants than non-trained interviewers. A supplement to training aimed at reducing the impact of personal schemata which may be irrelevant or counterproductive is the use of clear and detailed job descriptions. This provides at least a preliminary indication of what knowledge, skills and abilities a candidate should possess, as well as signals to the applicant about the properties of the job he or she is applying for.

Similarly, faulty schemata about what constitutes good as opposed to poor performance can lead to inaccurate performance appraisals, which erode work motivation, commitment and loyalty (see Chapter 6). Therefore, it is important for managers to identify accurately the behavioural characteristics and results indicative of good performance at the beginning of a performance review cycle. These characteristics can then serve as the benchmarks for evaluating employee performance.

The importance of using objective rather than subjective measures of employee performance was highlighted in a meta-analysis involving 50 studies and 8341 individuals. Results revealed that objective and subjective measures of employee performance were only moderately related. The researchers concluded that objective and subjective measures of performance are not interchangeable. Managers are thus advised to use more objectively based measures of performance – as much as possible – because subjective indicators are prone to bias and inaccuracy. In those cases where the job does not possess objective measures of performance, however, professionals should still use subjective evaluations. Furthermore, because memory of specific instances of employee performance deteriorates over time, employers need a mechanism for accurately recalling employee behaviour. Research reveals that individuals can be trained to be more accurate raters of performance. However, as was the case for hiring, detailed and accurate job descriptions are important. They are the backbone of the important objective side of performance evaluations. Job descriptions also, as are all elements of formalisation, contribute to organisational rigidity and inertia, which is not always a good thing (see Chapter 11 on organisational structure and Chapter 16 on organisational change).

**Critical thinking**

The inconsiderate, rude, insensitive, nasty supervisor may be allocated to the team you are managing. Apply the social information-processing model to your dealings with such persons.
4.4 Attributions

Why did the plant manager not inform us earlier about the plans to outsource production to China? Why were the French, German and Belgian governments against the war in Iraq, whereas Great Britain and the USA were strong proponents? Why did the golfer Woods find it necessary to have affairs when he was already married? And why was Dick Fuld, the former CEO of the now bankrupt Lehman Brothers, bank more preoccupied with staff wearing appropriate dress when his bank was moving towards disaster? Just like scientists, laymen try to answer why people are acting or behaving in a certain way, what the meaning is or underlying causes are of that unexpected behaviour. People want to make sense of the world by trying to find an explanation of other people’s behaviour. The explanations they come up with for these ‘why’ questions are attributions or the inferred causes why we behave the way we do.

Attributions are cognitive evaluations that attempt to formulate explanations for an event, such as failure or success in an achievement-oriented task. Studying how attributions operate is important for the understanding of behaviour. Insight in the functioning of attributions is of great significance in understanding how decisions are made in the context of performance appraisal, and the capability of professionals to influence employees towards future performance achievement and a great number of other decisions. As an example, two workers accomplish the same production level. The manager evaluates person A as displaying a lack of effort, while person B, who is achieving exactly the same productivity, is assessed as a hard worker. As a result of his evaluation the supervisor decides to give person B a pay rise because of the zeal at work seen by the supervisor. In contrast, person A is reprimanded because of his lack of effort.

Types of attribution

It is possible to formulate an almost unlimited number of attributions for perceived actions, events and behaviour. One influential framework identifies six dimensions: ‘locus of causality’; ‘stability’; ‘controllability’; ‘generalisability’; ‘desirability’; and ‘proximity’.

Early work on attribution searched for location of causality, discerning internal and external causes of behaviour. Internal causes of behaviour concern factors within the actor (internal factors), while external causes are situated outside the actor (external factors). Somebody who fails his statistics exam can attribute this deficiency to misfortune, task difficulty (both external causes) or intelligence, mood (internal causes).

The locus of causality classification was later expanded with a stability dimension, which refers to whether the attribution is static or dynamic in time. A task failure resulting from a single lack of effort is an unstable factor, while a lack of capability is considered a stable factor.

The controllability dimension underscores the significance of control over the causes of behaviour: are the events situated within or outside the command of a person? Returning to the example of task failure, a lack of effort is a cause within the command of a person, while task difficulty is a less controllable cause. When a person is always facing a condition that he or she does not control and the outcome is negative, this could lead to learned helplessness (see Chapter 2).

The combination of the locus of causality, stability and controllability dimensions leads to eight categories of attributions as displayed in Table 4.1.

The fourth dimension, generalisability, covers the specific character of a cause. This attribution dimension reveals information about whether an attribution or cause is generalisable
between different situations. A nasty organisational climate attributed to the CEO’s behaviour will have different implications from when this negative climate is explained by the existence of a culture that emphasises career advancement above all else (organisational culture is discussed in Chapter 12).

The desirability dimension mainly accentuates the features of attributions without considering the subjective appreciation and thus the social desirability of attributions. This dimension is essential for interpersonal attitudes. For example, Nicolas arrives at work half an hour late. The fact that he could not get out of bed is a less socially desirable attribution than being late at work because of trains being slow due to the wrong kind of snow.

The proximity dimension finally emphasises that behaviour can sometimes be explained by multiple causes in which different causes influence each other. For instance, job satisfaction at work is encouraged by organisational support, which in turn is influenced by the personality of organisational members. Burnout is influenced by perceived stress. However, this proximal cause of burnout is in turn affected by optimism, a more distal cause of burnout.39

### Attribution theories

Many theories have been developed about ascribing causes to behaviour. Three are particularly relevant to organisational behaviour: the correspondent inference theory; the co-variation theory; and the attribution theory and the related achievement motivation.

In his book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, Fritz Heider argues that naive psychology guides our interactions with other people through its influence on behaviour, leading us to form ideas about others and the use of that gathered information predicting future behaviour. Naive psychology provides us with the principles to build our picture of the social environment and guide our reactions to it.40

The **correspondent inference theory** describes how an alert perceiver infers another’s intentions and personal dispositions from his or her behaviour. It is a theory of how we use other people’s behaviour as a basic assumption for assessing the stability of their personalities. For example, your friend Dorotee likes to help other people. Consequently you might infer that she has an altruistic personality because of her helpful behaviour. The extent to which a person’s disposition (to help) is derived from a perceived slice of behaviour (what you observe) depends on three factors: non-common effects, social desirability of effects and degree of choice.
Non-common effects tell us more about a person’s disposition than expected effects. Behaviour reveals more about a person when it diverges from what is known as typical expected behaviour. Examiners might think they know more about a student when he wears dirty shorts and sandals full of mud for his oral examinations, than when he arrives well dressed and wearing polished shoes.

Socially undesirable behaviour leads to correspondent inference more than correct behaviour. A person making a strange noise and acting conspicuously while shopping in a supermarket reveals much information on that person’s personality than does ‘normal’ or inconspicuous behaviour.

A third factor is the person’s degree of free choice. Behaviour that is freely chosen tells much more about personality than behaviour that is coerced.

In the correspondent inference theory behaviour is attributed to an underlying personality characteristic. However, behaviour can also be the result of situational factors. The covariation principle states that for a factor to be the cause of behaviour it must be present when the behaviour occurs and absent when it does not. This theory explains whether behaviour stems from internal or external causes. In this context people make internal or external inferences after gathering three types of information. According to the covariation principle people are looking in three domains that are: the perceived stimulus object, other people who could be in a similar situation and the entire context surrounding the event (for instance, other time periods). These three types of information are also called distinctiveness, consensus and consistency.

Suppose your friend Helena is laughing all the way through the Monty Python and the Holy Grail movie. When you show her any other movie, even such comedy classics as Life of Brian or The Meaning of Life (two later Python movies, both arguably very funny, if you like that sort of humour), not a sound comes from her, which is behaviour very high in distinctiveness. If the pattern repeats itself at latter points in time Helena’s behaviour is consistent. Finally, your friend Helena may be alone in not laughing at the other movies, a case of low consensus. If everyone fails to laugh, consensus is high – and you might start wondering how the others perceive you.

Distinctiveness information is about whether the target person responds in the same way to other stimuli as well. Consensus information concerns whether only a few people respond in the same way as the target person. Finally, the consistency information answers the question: ‘Does the target person always respond in the same way to other stimuli as well?’

The combination of high consensus (others behave in the same manner in this situation), high consistency (this person behaves in the same manner on other occasions when placed in the same situation) and high distinctiveness information (this person does not behave in this manner in other situations) is likely to lead to external attributions.41 The combination of low consensus, high distinctiveness and low consistency will probably also result in external attributions.42 However, the chance of making internal attributions is considerable when the perceived behaviour is low on consensus (others do not behave in the same manner in this situation), high on consistency (this person behaves in the same manner on other occasions when placed in the same situation) and low on distinctiveness (this person behaves in the same manner in other situations). This kind of information configuration leads to internal attributions of the perceived effects in 85 per cent of cases.43 Figure 4.5 is an overview of which combinations of covariation information lead to internal or external attributions.

A third way of looking at attribution is a model designed to explain achievement behaviour and to predict subsequent changes in motivation and performance. Figure 4.6 presents a modified version of this model. According to this model, the attribution process begins after an individual performs a task. A person’s performance leads him or her to judge whether it was successful or unsuccessful. This evaluation then produces a causal analysis to determine if the performance was due to internal or external factors. Figure 4.6 indicates that in this model, ability and effort...
are the primary internal causes of performance and task difficulty; luck and help from others are the key external causes. These attributions for success and failure then influence how individuals feel about themselves.

It has been pointed out that high achievement motivates people to attribute their successes to their own efforts and their failures to not trying hard enough. If they fail they are likely to try again because they tend to believe that with greater effort they can succeed. These high achievement-motivated people consistently perceive their ability levels as being quite high. If they succeed it is because they tried hard and used their abilities.

By contrast, those with a low need for achievement view effort as irrelevant. They attribute failure to other factors; in particular lack of ability, a condition that they believe is one of their general characteristics. Success is considered a consequence of the external factors of easy tasks and luck. If we are interested in motivating a person, what will work with an achievement-motivated person may be absolutely useless with a person who lacks achievement motivation (also see Chapter 5). Consequently, educational programmes attempting to bring about motivational change and development in achievement should first focus on teaching the participants that effort does make a difference and that internal causation is a key factor mediating between a task and the level of performance of that task.

**Attributional biases**

Several tendencies or biases distort the interpretations we make of observed behaviour. Five such biases have been identified: the fundamental error, the defensive attribution, the actor–observer effect, self-serving bias and the fundamental attribution error.

The fundamental error refers to the observation that attributions are more often made in terms of internal causality. It is a widespread tendency of inferring internal causes rather than external causes of actions. However, this tendency is a cultural phenomenon, a product of Western, and particularly North American, culture.

![Figure 4.5 Covariation Information and Internal Versus External Attributions](image-url)
Defensive attribution has its roots in the belief in a just world. This type of distortion is characterised as the tendency to blame victims for their own misfortune and is an extension of the fundamental attribution error. Believing in a just world is in fact denying ‘fate’ or randomness. People have the need to believe that they control their surroundings and they must be able to reduce fate as a possible cause for events. They do not believe that good and bad things are randomly distributed. According to the belief in a just world an innocent victim would not be considered so innocent and would likely be ascribed responsibility for his or her condition. This is a convenient way for other people to put their minds at ease by telling themselves that such a thing cannot happen to them.47

The actor–observer effect concerns the fact that actors make different attributions about themselves compared to observers.48 An actor views his or her own actions in terms of a reaction to a situation whereas an observer perceives that behaviour in terms of a personal disposition. As the behaviour itself is more important to the observer than the contextual information, the observer compares the actor’s demeanour with that of other people under the same conditions.
and consequently makes attributions regarding the actor’s personality. However, the actor assesses his or her own behaviour in comparison to his or her reactions in different situations. So, the actor does not make any comparison with other people’s reactions. Hence, in the case of the actor, the context explains his or her behaviour. A special case of the actor–observer difference phenomenon is the subordinate–superior relationship. The attributions that subordinates make about themselves can differ from attributions that (professional) observers make about them. Research shows that actors and observers often perceive the same events in a totally different way. In a situation of failure a subordinate attributes the failure to external conditions, whereas the manager is likely to ascribe the failure to internal factors. This difference often leads to conflicts between the two.  

The self-serving bias is the tendency to attribute our positive outcomes to internal factors and to attribute our negative outcomes to external factors. People are inclined to bear personal responsibility for successful achievements but not for failures or problematic outcomes. In an organisational setting employees are likely to ascribe their successes to internal factors such as high ability and hard work, whereas failures or negative outcomes are attributed to uncontrollable external factors (difficult task, bad luck, unproductive co-workers or an unsympathetic boss). The three explanations are possible for this. The first is a motivational explanation and is based on self-esteem (see Chapter 2). People want to keep or enhance their self-esteem. They will be resistant to negative explanations, such as lack of ability or effort, which attack their self-esteem. The second is an information-processing explanation. According to this process the self-serving bias tendency will occur because of an imbalance in the logical processing of available information. The third explanation refers to impression management. Self-serving bias will arise when individuals act to manage the impressions they make on others by taking credit for successes and denying responsibility for mistakes, errors or negative outcomes (see Chapter 14).  

The fundamental attribution error refers to the fact that desirable actions and behaviour are attributed to internal factors when it is made by in-group members and to external causes for out-group members. In the case of undesirable actions and behaviour, the attribution error is reversed. These are attributed to external factors when it is made by in-group members and to internal causality for out-group members.  

Evidence about attribution

When you achieve high marks in an exam and you think this is the result of your intense preparation, then your self-esteem is likely to increase. In contrast, this same grade can either increase or decrease your self-esteem if you believe that the test was easy. Over time the feelings that people have about their past performance influence future performance. Figure 4.6 illustrates that future performance is likely to be higher when individuals attribute past success to internal causes in comparison with external attributions and lower when failure is attributed to internal causes in comparison with external factors. Future performance is more uncertain when individuals attribute either their success or failure to external causes.  

There is considerable evidence about the importance of attribution. A meta-analysis of 104 studies involving almost 15 000 individuals showed that people who attributed failure to their lack of ability (as opposed to bad luck) experienced psychological depression. The exact opposite attributions (good luck rather than high ability) tended to trigger depression in people experiencing positive events. In short, perceived bad luck took the sting out of a negative outcome, but perceived good luck reduced the joy associated with success.
Similarly, a study of salesmen in the UK revealed that positive, internal attributions for success were associated with higher sales and performance ratings.\textsuperscript{54} A second study examined the attribution processes of employees who were made redundant by a plant closing. The empirical evidence was consistent with the model: the explanation for job loss was attributed to internal and stable causes; so the life satisfaction, self-esteem and expectations for re-employment diminished. Furthermore, research shows that when individuals attribute their success to internal rather than external factors, they have higher expectations for future success, report a greater desire for achievement and set higher performance goals.\textsuperscript{55}

Attribution models can be used to explain how professionals handle poorly performing employees. One study revealed that managers gave employees more immediate, frequent and negative feedback when they attributed their performance to low effort. This reaction was even more pronounced when the manager’s success was dependent on an employee’s performance. A second study indicated that professionals tended to transfer employees whose poor performance was attributed to a lack of ability. These managers also decided to take no immediate action when poor performance was attributed to external factors beyond an individual’s control.\textsuperscript{56}

Application of attribution models

The evidence presented in the previous section has several important implications for employers. First, employers tend to attribute behaviour disproportionately to internal causes.\textsuperscript{57} This can result in inaccurate evaluations of performance, leading to reduced employee motivation. No one likes to be blamed for something caused by factors they perceive to be beyond their control. Further, because managers’ responses to employee performance vary according to their attributions, attributional biases may lead to inappropriate actions, including promotions, transfers and lay-offs. This can weaken motivation and performance.

Attributional training sessions for managers are in order. Basic attributional processes can be explained and professionals can be taught to detect and avoid attributional biases. Finally, an employee’s attributions for his or her own performance can have dramatic effects on subsequent motivation, performance and personal attitudes such as self-esteem. For instance, people tend to give up, develop lower expectations for future success and experience decreased self-esteem when they attribute failure to a lack of ability (see Chapter 2). Fortunately, attributional retraining can improve both motivation and performance. Research shows that employees can be taught to attribute their failures to a lack of effort rather than to a lack of ability.\textsuperscript{58} This attributional realignment paves the way for improved motivation and performance.

Decision-makers and managers need to be aware of employee attributions if they are to make full use of the motivation concepts, explained in Chapters 5 and 6. The difficulty of doing so and of linking the pitfalls of attribution to the practical use of motivation theories may also explain the preference many students and managers have for simple, aged and also poorly supported theories, particularly those of Maslow and Herzberg (see Chapter 5).

Critical thinking

Use your accumulated experience (from work or school) to list stories of success and failure – then examine the factors to which those successes and failures were attributed.
4.5 Self-fulfilling prophecy

The historical roots of the self-fulfilling prophecy are found in Greek mythology. Pygmalion was a sculptor who hated women yet fell in love with an ivory statue he had carved of a beautiful woman. He became so infatuated with the statue that he prayed to the goddess Aphrodite to bring her to life. The goddess heard his prayer, granted his wish and Pygmalion’s statue came to life. The essence of the self-fulfilling prophecy, or Pygmalion effect, is that people’s expectations or beliefs determine their behaviour and performance, thus serving to make their expectations come true. In other words, we strive to validate our perceptions of reality, no matter how faulty they may be. The notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy is an important perceptual outcome we need to understand better. Furthermore, this type of effect is not necessarily good. Negative expectations lead to poor outcomes, an effect sometimes called the Golem effect.

The Pygmalion effect

The self-fulfilling prophecy was first demonstrated in an academic environment. After giving a bogus test of academic potential to students from grades 1 to 6, researchers informed teachers that certain students had high potential for achievement. In reality, students were randomly assigned to the ‘high potential’ and ‘control’ (normal potential) groups. Results showed that children designated as having high potential obtained significantly greater increases in both IQ scores and reading ability than the control group. The teachers of the supposedly high potential group got better results because their high expectations caused them to give harder assignments, more feedback, and more recognition of achievement. Students in the normal potential group did not excel, because their teachers did not expect outstanding results.

Figure 4.7 presents a model of the self-fulfilling prophecy that helps explain how the Pygmalion effect works. As indicated, high supervisory expectation produces better leadership (linkage 1), which subsequently leads employees to develop higher self-expectations (linkage 2). Higher expectations motivate workers to exert more effort (linkage 3), ultimately increasing performance (linkage 4) and supervisory expectations (linkage 5). Successful performance also improves an employee’s self-expectancy for achievement (linkage 6). The term the set-up-to-fail syndrome has been suggested to represent the negative side of the performance-enhancing process depicted in Figure 4.7.

Assume that an employee makes a mistake, such as losing notes during a meeting, or exhibits poor performance on a task by delivering a report a day late. An employer then begins to wonder if this person has what it takes to be successful in the organisation. These doubts lead the employer to watch this person more carefully. The employee, of course, notices this and begins to sense a loss of trust. The suspect employee then responds in one of two ways. He or she may doubt his or her own judgement and competence. This in turn leads the individual to become more averse to taking risk and to reduce the number of ideas and suggestions for the professional’s critical review. The employer notices this behaviour and interprets it as an example of low initiative. Alternatively, the employee may do the opposite and take on more and more responsibility so that he or she can demonstrate his or her competence and worth. This is likely to cause the employee to fail, which in turn reinforces the employer’s suspicions. This process results in a destructive relationship fuelled by negative expectations. The self-fulfilling prophecy works in both directions. A better term for this effect was suggested earlier, the Golem effect, ‘golem’ meaning oaf in Hebrew and Yiddish. Expect an oaf (the leader expects poor performance and thereby impairs actual performance) and an oaf is what you get.
Evidence about the self-fulfilling prophecy

By raising instructors’ and professionals’ expectations for individuals performing a wide variety of tasks, higher levels of achievement and productivity can be obtained. Subjects in these field studies included airmen at the United States Air Force Academy Preparatory School, disadvantaged people in job-training programmes, electronics assemblers, trainees in a military command course, US naval personnel and cadets in a naval officer course in the Israel defence forces. However, these studies exclusively involved men.

To overcome this limitation, a recent team of researchers conducted two experimental studies on samples of female and male cadets in the Israel defence forces. Results revealed that the Pygmalion effect was produced for both female and male cadets — but only when the leader was male. Female leaders did not produce a significant Pygmalion effect. This finding must be considered in the light of the fact that women were rated as better leaders than men in the Israel defence forces. The researchers concluded that the Pygmalion effect clearly works on both women and men when...
the leader is male but not when the leader is female. Recent evidence suggests that the gender effect may not be as distinct as previously thought.

A meta-analysis reviewed 13 studies regarding the Pygmalion effect in work organisations and had a closer look into the nature of the effect. This analysis revealed the strength of the Pygmalion effect in organisations. Seventy-nine per cent of the people in the high expectancy groups outperformed the average people in the control groups. Furthermore, the meta-analysis revealed that the Pygmalion effect varied depending on the type of organisation. The effect was stronger in military settings than in business settings. The effect was also larger for those subordinates whose initial level of performance was low in comparison to those in which whole group expectations were induced.

**Application: the self-fulfilling prophecy at work**

Largely due to the Pygmalion effect, expectations have a powerful influence on employee behaviour and performance. Consequently, professionals need to harness the Pygmalion effect by building a hierarchical framework that reinforces positive performance expectations throughout the organisation. This framework is based on employees’ self-expectations. In turn, positive self-expectations improve interpersonal expectations by encouraging people to work towards common goals. This co-operation enhances group-level productivity and promotes positive performance expectations within the work group. At Microsoft, for example, employees routinely put in 75-hour weeks, especially when work groups are trying to meet shipment deadlines for new products. At Microsoft positive group-level expectations help to create and reinforce an organisational culture of high expectancy of success. This process then makes people enthusiastic about working for the organisation, thereby reducing turnover.

As positive self-expectations are the foundation for creating an organisation-wide Pygmalion effect (and avoiding the negative side or Golem effect), let us then consider how employers can create positive performance expectations. This task may be accomplished by using various combinations of the following:

- Recognise that everyone has the potential to increase his or her performance.
- Instil confidence in your staff.
- Set high performance goals.
- Positively reinforce employees for a job well done.
- Provide constructive feedback when necessary.
- Help employees grow through the organisation.
- Introduce new employees as if they have outstanding potential.
- Become aware of your personal prejudices and any non-verbal messages that may discourage others.
- Encourage employees to visualise the successful execution of tasks.
- Help employees master key skills and tasks.

**Critical thinking**

Relying on self-fulfilling prophecies might seem manipulative. What do you think?
4.6 Communication: the input to perception

The information we perceive sometimes comes to us without prompting and without any discernible sender. We observe the interior of our boss’s office. The boss may or may not be aware of this. Our colleagues, superiors, subordinates and friends behave in certain ways, say things and do so in ways that convey to the perceiver a certain volume of information. At this point we shift focus from the recipients of information or the perceiver to the sender or the communicator.

Even more than in the industrial age, communication is the central element in the information age or, as it is sometimes called, the information society. For example, the quality of student–faculty communication – in the professor’s office, informally on campus, or before and after lectures – is positively related to student motivation. Similarly, employee satisfaction with organisational communication was positively and significantly correlated with both job satisfaction and performance.67 Finally, note that many executives believe that written communication skills and interpersonal communication skills are critical competences that need enhancement via training. These executives believed the lack of communication skills had resulted in increased costs.68

The following sections will help you understand better how communication processes work and how you can both improve your communication skills and design more effective communication programmes. We will discuss basic dimensions of the communication process, interpersonal communication, organisational communication patterns, the dynamics of modern communications and the distribution of information.

Communication is defined as ‘the exchange of information between a sender and a receiver, and the inference (perception) of meaning between the individuals involved’.69 Analysis of this exchange reveals that communication is a two-way process consisting of consecutively linked elements (see Figure 4.8). Anyone who understands this process can analyse their own communication patterns as well as design communication programmes that fit personal or organisational needs. This section reviews a perceptual process model of communication and discusses various barriers that can harm effective communication.

![Figure 4.8 A Perceptual Process Model of Communication](image-url)
4.6 COMMUNICATION: THE INPUT TO PERCEPTION

A perceptual process model of communication

Communicating is not like a pipe into which a message is placed by a sender and retrieved at the other end by the receiver, unimpaired by passage, precise and perfectly understood. It is fraught with miscommunication. As a result, models of communication conceive it as a form of social information processing (recall the discussion earlier in this chapter) in which receivers interpret messages by cognitively processing information. This view led to the development of a perceptual model of communication that depicts communication as a process in which receivers create meaning in their own minds. Let us briefly examine the elements of the perceptual process model shown in Figure 4.8. The starting point is the sender, an individual, group or organisation that desires, or attempts, to communicate with a particular receiver. Receivers may be individuals, groups or organisations.

Communication begins when a sender encodes an idea or thought, translating them into a code or language that can be understood by others. People typically encode using words, numbers, gestures, non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions or pictures. Different methods of encoding can be used to portray similar ideas.

The output of encoding is a message. There are two important points to keep in mind about messages. First, they contain more than meets the eye. Messages may contain hidden agendas as well as trigger moods or emotional reactions. For example, comparisons of internal and external documents within the forest products industry, over a 10-year period, demonstrated that executives’ private and public evaluative statements about events and situations were inconsistent. These executives apparently wanted to convey different messages to the public and to internal employees. For example, a manager who runs the testing department of a large Internet service provider may discover that a complaint from someone about a lazy team member in reality reflected resentment about not being involved in that particular team.

Second, messages need to match the medium that is used to transmit them. How would you evaluate the match between the message of letting someone know they have been fired through a text message or the cancellation of company credit cards or office access codes? These examples show how thoughtless employers can be when they do not carefully consider the interplay between a message and the medium used to convey it.

People can communicate through a variety of media, including face-to-face conversations, telephone calls, email, voice mail, videoconferencing, written memos or letters, photographs or drawings, meetings, bulletin boards, computer output, and charts or graphs. Choosing the appropriate medium depends on many factors, including the nature of the message, its intended purpose, the type of audience, proximity to the audience, time horizon for disseminating the message and personal preferences.

All media have advantages and disadvantages. Face-to-face conversations are useful for communicating about sensitive or important issues and those requiring feedback and intensive interaction. Telephones are convenient, fast and private but non-verbal information is absent. Although writing memos or letters is time-consuming, it is a good medium when it is difficult to meet, when formality and a written record are important, and when face-to-face interaction is not necessary to enhance understanding.

Decoding is the receiver’s version of encoding. Decoding consists of translating verbal, oral or visual aspects of a message into a form that can be interpreted. Receivers rely on social information processing to determine the meaning of a message during decoding (see the sections on perception in this chapter). Decoding is a key contributor to misunderstanding in interracial and
intercultural communication because decoding by the receiver is subject to social and cultural values that may not be understood by the sender (see Chapter 12). Also, the growing popularity of email and the explosion in the use of social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter and more broadly blogging has brought about what some people refer to as a new language, one which is not always easily decoded by those unfamiliar with it.

In contrast to the simple conduit model’s (the pipe at the beginning of this section) assumption that meaning is directly transferred from sender to receiver, the perceptual model is based on the belief that a receiver creates the meaning of a message in his or her mind. Often, a receiver’s interpretation of a message will differ from what the sender intended. In turn, receivers act according to their own interpretations (not that of the sender).

Redundancy of communication is one way to reduce unintentionality in communication. Redundancy can be achieved by transmitting the message over multiple media. For example, a production manager might follow up a phone conversation about a critical schedule change with a memo. Certainly for the communication of change processes it can be important to transmit your message over multiple media. This is necessary to reduce the resistance to change and to enhance acceptance of the announced changes (also see Chapter 16 on organisational change).

Communication is multidimensional and takes place at two separate but interrelated levels.71 The content level (‘what’) covers basically factual or cognitive information, such as ideas, places, people and objects. The relationship level (‘how’) covers information on our emotional states or attitudinal reactions towards our environment. Consider the following example: ‘Close the door!’ and ‘Would you mind closing the door, please?’ The content of the messages is the same but different kinds of relationships are implicitly assumed.72

Much communication is actually an attempt to control the relationship. How can the angry reaction of a supervisor be explained when an employee indicates that the supervisor has made a mistake? On the content level the employee is right, but the supervisor has difficulty to accept that a subordinate corrects him. This example also illustrates that confusion between the two levels occurs frequently. Have you ever felt resistance from a colleague when you made remarks on his or her work? Criticising how a task is undertaken is quite often taken personally.

Communication is also influenced by the context in which it takes place (e.g. the space where the communication takes place or the temporal context). Difficulties with cross-cultural communication illustrate the importance of this context (see Chapter 12 on culture).

Feedback is the receiver’s response to a message. Now the receiver becomes a sender. The receiver encodes a response and then transmits it to the original sender. This new message is then decoded and interpreted. Feedback is used as a comprehension check. It gives the initial senders an idea of how accurately their message has been understood. Feedback is influenced by perception and attribution and is a central element in process theories of motivation (see Chapter 6).

The distinction between sender and receiver is presented in a simple way to clarify the communication process. In real life, people are senders and receivers of messages simultaneously. When talking to someone, we are continuously looking at the effects of our words and, in doing so, receiving information from the so-called receiver. And vice versa: the receiver is reacting to the so-called sender’s message while listening. The concept of communicators is proposed as an alternative to the distinction between sender and receiver.73 The perceptual model of communication presents communication as a two-way process. A distinction can be made between one-way
and two-way communication. One-way communication does not allow for immediate feedback, like sending a report to a colleague. Two-way communication has the opportunity to ask questions and to give feedback, like in telephone calls or face-to-face conversations. One-way communication is usually faster but often less accurate than two-way communication.²⁴

Noise represents anything that interferes with the transmission and understanding of a message. It affects all linkages of the communication process. Noise includes factors such as speech impairment, poor telephone connections, illegible handwriting, inaccurate statistics in a memo or report, poor hearing and eyesight and physical distance between sender and receiver and incompatible data formats.

Activity

Evaluate the following statements in terms of the encoding and decoding that may take place in creating and receiving them:

‘This company imports and sells cars from exotic companies . . . Skoda, Daewoo, Isuzu.’
‘This organisation faces some important challenges and opportunities . . . ’
‘The organisation will be re-engineered to allow us to realize our full potential.’

Barriers to effective communication

Communication noise is a barrier to effective communication as it interferes with the accurate transmission and reception of a message. Awareness of these barriers is a good starting point to improve the communication process. There are four key barriers to effective communication: process, personal, physical and semantic.

Every element of the perceptual model of communication shown in Figure 4.8 is a potential process barrier. Consider the following examples:

- Sender barrier. A customer gets incorrect information from a customer service agent because he or she was recently hired and lacks experience.
- Encoding barrier. An employee for whom English is a second language has difficulty explaining why a delivery was late.
- Message barrier. An employee misses a meeting for which he or she never received a formal invitation.
- Medium barrier. A salesperson gives up trying to make a sales call when the potential customer fails to return three previous phone calls.
- Decoding barrier. An employee does not know how to respond to a supervisor’s request to stop exhibiting ‘passive aggressive’ behaviour.
- Receiver barrier. A student who is talking to a friend during a lecture asks the professor the same question as the one that has just been answered.
- Feedback barrier. The non-verbal head nodding of an interviewer leads an interviewee to think that he or she is answering questions well.
Barriers in any of these process elements can distort the transfer of meaning. Reducing these barriers is essential for effective communication but also a challenge in a world of considerable globalisation.

There are many personal barriers to communication. Eight of the more common ones are:

- People possess varying levels of communication skills.
- People use different frames of reference and experiences to interpret the world around them (see the previous sections on perception); people selectively attend to various stimuli. These differences affect both what we say and what we think we hear.
- The level of interpersonal trust between people can either prevent or enable effective communication. Communication is more likely to be distorted when trust is absent.
- The existence of stereotypes and prejudices can powerfully distort what we perceive about others (see Chapter 9 on organisational climate).
- The egos of the people communicating can cause political battles, turf wars and the pursuit of power, recognition and resources. Egos influence how people treat each other as well as our receptivity to being influenced by others.
- The ability to listen – varies.
- The natural tendency to evaluate or judge a sender’s message from our own point of view or frame of reference. Strong feelings or emotions about the issue being discussed enhance the own evaluation tendency.
- The inability to listen with understanding: seeing ideas and attitudes from the other person’s point of view. Listening with understanding reduces defensiveness and improves accuracy in perceiving a message.

The distance between employees can be a physical barrier that interferes with effective communication. It is hard to understand someone who is speaking to you from 20 metres away. Noise is an additional barrier. Poor telephone lines or crashed computers represent physical barriers to effective communication through modern technologies. However, physical barriers can be reduced and walls can be torn down. This can create an open space office layout with easy communication – but lots of potential for noise problems. Making the optimum choice of medium and so reduce the physical barriers is a way to manage these barriers.

Semantics is the study of words. Semantic barriers show up as encoding and decoding errors because these phases of communication involve transmitting and receiving words and symbols. These barriers occur very easily. Consider the following statement: *crime is ubiquitous*.

Do you understand the statement? It might be simpler to say that ‘crime is all around us’ or ‘crime is everywhere’. Choosing your words carefully is the easiest way to reduce semantic barriers. Avoiding jargon that is not familiar to the person you are talking to also helps avoiding miscommunication. This barrier can also be decreased by avoiding mixed messages and awareness of cultural diversity. Mixed messages occur when a person’s words imply one message while his or her actions or non-verbal signals suggest something different.

Simple strategies may improve your personal communication skills. First, make sure your message is clear by using the following tips:

- **Empathy.** Put yourself in the perspective of the receiver when you encode a message.
- **Redundancy.** Repeat the major elements (‘say what you are going to say, say it, and then say what you have said’).
4.7 Interpersonal communication

The quality of interpersonal communication within an organisation is very important. People with good communication skills have been found to help groups make better decisions and to be promoted more frequently than individuals with less developed abilities. Although there is no universally accepted definition of communication competence, it is a performance-based index of an individual’s ability to use effectively the appropriate communication behaviour in a given context.

Communication competence is determined by three components: communication abilities and traits, situational factors and the individuals involved in the interaction (see Figure 4.9).

![Figure 4.9 Communication Competence Affects Upward Mobility](image)

- **Effective timing.** Choose a moment when it is less likely that the receiver is distracted by noise or other messages.
- **Descriptive.** Focus on the problem instead of the person; give advice for improvement instead of blaming the receiver.
- **Feedback.** Use feedback to check whether your message has been received and reached its response.
- **Ask questions.** Summing up meetings, exploring the other side’s ideas, objectives concerns, and so on.

**Critical thinking**

When a person tells you ‘correct me if I’m wrong’, it is a message encoded in words. Which different messages might this statement contain when it is encoded and decoded?
Cross-cultural awareness, for example, is an important communication ability or trait (Chapter 12). Communication competence also implies knowing which communication medium is most suitable in a given situation. Communication competence is also influenced by the individuals involved in the interaction. For example, people are likely to withhold information and react emotionally or defensively when interacting with someone they dislike or distrust. Communication competence can be improved by controlling one’s communication skills.

**Verbal and non-verbal communication**

A common distinction in communication literature is the one between verbal (written and spoken) and non-verbal communication. Two major differences between verbal and non-verbal communication can be indicated.

First, verbal communication is usually more conscious, while non-verbal signals are more automatic and unconscious. We rarely plan gestures and body movements during conversations, while we mostly do plan what to say or write. Second, non-verbal communication is not as clear and rule-bound as verbal communication. If your colleague looks at his watch, what does that mean? Are you boring him or does he have another appointment planned after this conversation? Consequently, non-verbal signals are more ambiguous and can be misinterpreted. Looking at the whole communication context might help to avoid misunderstandings. If your colleague is also leaning backwards and yawning while looking at his watch, there is a big chance you are indeed boring him.

**Oral communication** is the most frequent means of communication. Examples are diverse: presentations, group discussions, face-to-face conversations, meetings, but also gossip and informal exchanges through the grapevine (which is the unofficial communication system of the informal organisation, as will be explained further in the chapter). Oral communication is fast and allows for immediate feedback. When an oral message is conveyed, rapid feedback is possible to check whether the receiver understands the message correctly. A major disadvantage of oral communication in organisations arises when a message has to pass through various people. Every receiver interprets the message differently and in the end, the content might be changed significantly. The more people are involved, the greater the chance that communication is distorted.

Writing is another way of verbal communication. Organisations typically use a lot of **written communication**: letters, emails, meeting minutes, manuals, organisational newsletters, reports. Written communication both has advantages and drawbacks. Written communication leaves a record and can be easily verified. The message can be stored, which allows later reference to an existing written message (for instance, the corporate position on social responsibility). This implies that the message does not have to be repeated all over again. People can read it for themselves. Computers, networks and email have improved the efficiency of written communication significantly. Another advantage is that people usually think more carefully before writing something than before saying something. Consequently, a written message is probably clearer, more logical and better considered. These advantages come at a cost. Writing takes time. It is not very flexible and does not permit feedback, at least not instantaneously.

**Non-verbal communication** is ‘any message, sent or received independent of the written or spoken word.'
INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

... [It] includes such factors as use of time and space, distance between persons when conversing, use of colour, dress, walking behaviour, standing, positioning, seating arrangement, office locations and furnishing.

Non-verbal communication can help to complement, illustrate or emphasise what is said. Sometimes non-verbal signals and speech contradict each other, in which case we are more prone to believe what we see than what we hear.

Body movements (such as leaning forwards or backwards) and gestures (such as pointing) provide additional non-verbal information that can either enhance or detract from the communication process. A recent study showed that the use of appropriate hand gestures increased listeners' practical understanding of a message. For example, open body positions, such as leaning backward, openness, warmth, closeness and availability for communication. Defensiveness is communicated by gestures such as folding arms, crossing hands and crossing one's legs. Inaccurate interpretations can create additional 'noise' in the communication process.

Touching is another powerful non-verbal cue. People tend to touch those they like, although it might be necessary to distinguish between different kinds of touching to correctly interpret what you see, according to the interpersonal relationship and the way and amount of touching. A doctor, who examines a patient, touches only for professional reasons. More importantly, men and women interpret touching differently. It might be possible to diminish sexual harassment claims by keeping this perceptual difference in mind. Moreover, norms for touching vary significantly around the world (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Norms for Touching Vary across Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Norms</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| China       | - Hugging or taking someone's arm is considered inappropriate.  
- Winking or beckoning with one's index finger is considered rude. |
| The Philippines | - Handshaking and a pat on the back are common greetings. |
| Indonesia   | - Handshaking and head nodding are customary greetings. |
| Japan       | - Business cards are exchanged before bowing or handshaking.  
- A weak handshake is common.  
- Lengthy or frequent eye contact is considered impolite. |
| Malaysia    | - It is considered impolite to touch someone casually, especially on the top of the head.  
- It is best to use your right hand to eat and to touch people and things. |
| South Korea | - Men bow slightly and shake hands, sometimes with two hands; women refrain from shaking hands.  
- It is considered polite to cover your mouth while laughing. |
| Thailand    | - Public displays of temper or affection are frowned on.  
- It is considered impolite to point at anything using your foot or to show the soles of your feet. |

Facial expressions convey a wealth of information. Smiling, for instance, typically represents warmth, happiness or friendship, whereas frowning conveys dissatisfaction or anger. However, the association between facial expressions and emotions varies across cultures. One needs to be careful in interpreting facial expressions among diverse groups of employees. A smile, for example, does not convey the same emotion in different countries. In some cultures, people learn to suppress or hide their emotions. In Western countries; for instance, men are not supposed to cry, while women are not supposed to express anger in public.

Eye contact is a strong non-verbal cue that serves four functions in communication. First, eye contact regulates the flow of communication by signalling the beginning and end of conversation. There is a tendency to look away from others when beginning to speak and to look at them when done. Second, gazing (as opposed to glaring) facilitates and monitors feedback because it reflects interest and attention. Third, eye contact conveys emotion. People tend to avoid eye contact when discussing bad news or providing negative feedback. Fourth, gazing relates to the type of relationship between communicators. As is true for body movements, gestures and facial expressions, norms for eye contact vary across cultures. Westerners are taught at an early age to look at their parents when spoken to. In contrast, Asians are taught to avoid eye contact with a parent or superior in order to show obedience and subservience.

Christopher is a business school professor. Before the summer vacation he had negotiated teaching assignments with his head of department, Frank. In return for a heavy teaching load in the autumn term, he had been promised a sabbatical in the spring that he planned to spend at a university in Scotland. He even had this promise in writing. Then, as the summer vacation drew to a close, his colleague Will was diagnosed with depression and put on extended sick leave. When Christopher received the following email from Frank, parts of it were not surprising.

Dear Christopher,
Hope it went well in Montreal. In the meantime, we have some teaching challenges. Will has depression and is on sick leave until late October (at least). We need to cover his three courses, Entrepreneurship, Business Environment for the MSc and Knowledge Management in the MBA program. I am asking you to take on the Business Environment course, since you are director of that course anyway. In return you won’t have to teach the Organisation course for the diploma program, which will not be offered this term. Petra takes the main responsibility for the MB since she was already involved. Students meet three times, the second one in October is about organisational culture. It has been said that you could do this blindfolded.

I am aware that I am pushing you hard but we have to help each other. However, you can relax the whole spring term amongst Scottish highland cattle and whiskey.

Nevertheless, Christopher was intensely annoyed with the message. Frank clearly wanted him to take on even more teaching than the courses he expected, but the problem was not even that, since Christopher refused all but one course. In accepting one and refusing the other task, Christopher told Frank in clear terms that his (Frank’s) choice of words was unreasonable.

For discussion
Why was Christopher so upset and was that reaction appropriate under the circumstances?
Active listening

A study showed that listening effectiveness was positively associated with success in sales and obtaining managerial promotions. Estimates suggest that people typically spend about 9 per cent of a working day reading, 16 per cent writing, 30 per cent talking and 45 per cent listening. Most people are not very good at listening. For example, communication experts estimate that people generally comprehend about 25 per cent of a typical verbal message. This problem is partly due to the fact that we can process information faster than most people talk. The average speaker communicates 125 words a minute while we can process 500 words a minute. Poor listeners use this information-processing gap to daydream and think about other things, thereby missing important parts of what is being communicated.

Listening involves much more than hearing a message. Hearing is merely the physical component of listening. Listening is the process of actively decoding and interpreting verbal messages. Listening requires cognitive attention and information processing; hearing does not.

Listener comprehension represents the extent to which an individual can recall factual information and draw accurate conclusions and inferences from a verbal message. Factors that influence listener comprehension are the characteristics of the listener and the speaker, respectively. The character of the message and environmental conditions also play a role. Figure 4.10 illustrates the many influences on listening comprehension.

![Listener Comprehension Model](image)

**Figure 4.10** Listener Comprehension Model

Assertiveness, aggressiveness and non-assertiveness

The saying ‘You can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar’ captures the difference between using an assertive communication style and an aggressive one. An assertive style is expressive and self-enhancing and is based on the ‘ethical notion that it is not right or good to violate our own or others’ basic human rights, such as the right to self-expression or the right to be treated with dignity and respect’. An aggressive style is also expressive and self-enhancing but it tries to take unfair advantage of others. A non-assertive style is characterised by timid and self-denying behaviour. Non-assertiveness is ineffective because it gives the other person an unfair advantage. Non-assertiveness aims to appease others and avoid conflict at any cost.

It is possible to improve a person’s communication competence by trying to be more assertive and less aggressive or non-assertive. This can be achieved by using the appropriate non-verbal and verbal behaviour listed in Table 4.3. Remember that non-verbal and verbal behaviour should complement and reinforce each other. One should attempt to use the non-verbal behaviour of good eye contact; a strong, steady and audible voice; and selective interruptions. Avoid non-verbal behaviour such as glaring or little eye contact; threatening gestures or slumped posture; and a weak or whiny voice.

Appropriate verbal behaviour includes direct and unambiguous language and the use of ‘I’ messages instead of ‘you’ statements. For example, when you say, ‘Mike, I was disappointed with your report because it contained typographical errors’, rather than ‘Mike, you made a bad report’,

### Table 4.3 Communication Styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication style</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Non-verbal behaviour pattern</th>
<th>Verbal behaviour pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Pushing hard without attacking; permits others to influence outcome; expressive and self-enhancing without intruding on others</td>
<td>Good eye contact</td>
<td>Direct and unambiguous language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comfortable but firm posture</td>
<td>No attributions or evaluations of other’s behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strong, steady and audible voice</td>
<td>Use of ‘I’ statements and co-operative ‘we’ statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facial expressions matched to message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriately serious tone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Selective interruptions to ensure understanding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Taking advantage of others; expressive and self-enhancing at other’s expense</td>
<td>Glaring eye contact</td>
<td>Swear words and abusive language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Moving or leaning too close Threatening gestures (pointed finger, clenched fist)</td>
<td>Attributions and evaluations of other’s behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loud voice</td>
<td>Sexist or racist terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent interruptions</td>
<td>Explicit threats or put-downs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-assertive</td>
<td>Encouraging others to take advantage of us; inhibited; self-denying</td>
<td>Little eye contact</td>
<td>Qualifiers (‘maybe’, ‘kind of’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Downward glances</td>
<td>Fillers (‘uh’, ‘you know’, ‘well’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Slumped posture</td>
<td>Negaters (‘It’s not really that important’, ‘I’m not sure’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Constantly shifting weight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wringing hands</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Weak or whiny voice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

you reduce defensiveness. ‘I’ statements describe your feelings about someone’s performance or behaviour instead of laying blame on the person. An alternative is the use of ‘we’ messages, as applied to the above example: ‘Mike, we need to talk about your report, because there are some typographical errors. It is important that we deliver a good report.’ ‘We’ messages help to convey an impression of partnership and joint responsibility for any problem to be discussed. Of course, assertiveness implies more than reacting to behaviour of others. We distinguish between giving criticism, making clear requests and saying no.

**Evidence about interpersonal communication**

Communication experts estimate that non-verbal communication is responsible for up to 60 per cent of a message being communicated. So, one’s non-verbal signals should be consistent with one’s intended verbal messages.

Women, in general, are more likely to focus on non-verbal signals when communicating, which explains why they are often better listeners than men. Men usually tend to focus more on words, both in conversations and written documents. The increase of impersonal communication through emails, faxes and documents favours male-oriented communication, while the rise of videoconferencing and other personal information technologies might be an advantage for women.

Women nodded their heads and moved their hands more than men. Leaning forward, large body shifts and foot and leg movements were exhibited more frequently by men. Although it is both easy and fun to interpret body movements and gestures, it is important to remember that body-language analysis is subjective, easily misinterpreted and highly dependent on the context and cross-cultural differences.

**Application of interpersonal communication**

To avoid confusion between the content and relationship levels of communication, it is important to give criticism in an appropriate way, focusing on the action and not on the person. Assertiveness implies being friendly towards the person, but being clear towards the task. The following advice can help to give criticism in an appropriate way, assuming that you have higher rank than the other person:

- Describe the situation or the behaviour of people to which you are reacting. Express your feelings and/or explain what impact the other’s behaviour has on you.
- Give the other person the chance to react to your criticism. Empathise with the other person’s position in the situation.
- Specify what changes you would like to see in the situation or in another person’s behaviour and offer to negotiate those changes with the other person.
- Indicate, in a non-threatening way, the possible consequences if change does not occur.
- Summarise, after two-way discussion, the agreed action, making sure the other person knows what is expected.
- Focus on ‘the here-and-now’: events from the past or old feelings may not influence your current interaction.
Making clear requests can help managers and others to avoid misunderstandings that lead to criticism. Clear requests can also help to fulfil unmet needs by simply asking for it. Some suggestions can help to make assertive requests:

- Decide what you want. This may not always be easy or clear-cut. First state what you do not want and then arrive at what you want through an elimination process.
- Decide whom to ask. This implies thinking about who can meet your request. Also prepare what to do when that person does not want to fulfil your request. It might be helpful to consider what impact your request may have on the other person.
- Decide when to ask. Timing is important when asking requests to someone.
- Decide how to ask. Do not speak in vague or ambiguous ways, because that makes it more difficult to understand clearly what you want.

Another important aspect of assertiveness implies saying ‘no’ to requests by other people. We often think that refusing a question will lead to anger or that the other person will not like us any more. Or they may be hurt or think that we cannot cope with it. Accordingly, we often say yes while we want to say no, which may lead to an overload of work. We feel guilty saying no, although there is no reason for it. The following tips can help to say no in an assertive way:

- Give reasons, not excuses.
- Keep it brief and simple, no long lists of reasons.
- Be clear and unambiguous that you refuse the request.
- Use appropriate non-verbal behaviour, which also fits with your verbal communication.
- Make use of the ‘broken record’ technique. This means calmly repeating the same message over and over again, without getting angry or changing your mind.

**Activity**

**Estimate your potential for communication distortion**

**Instructions**
Circle your response to each question by using the following scale:
1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree
3 = neither agree nor disagree
4 = agree
5 = strongly agree

**Supervisor’s upward influence**
In general, my immediate supervisor can have a big impact on my career in this organisation.
Organisational communication implies both formal and informal communication, internal and external communication. Examining organisational communication patterns is a good way to identify factors contributing to effective and ineffective management. Employees seem not to receive enough information from their immediate supervisors. It is therefore no surprise to learn that many employees use unofficial, informal communication systems (the grapevine) as a source of information. This section promotes a working knowledge of two important communication patterns: hierarchical communication and the grapevine.

**Hierarchical communication**

Hierarchical communication is defined as ‘those exchanges of information and influence between organisational members, at least one of whom has formal authority (as defined by official organisational sources) to direct and evaluate the activities of other organisational members.’ This communication pattern involves information exchanged downwards from the top of the organisation to the bottom. It is characterized by a clear chain of command and direct supervision. Hierarchical communication is essential for maintaining order, efficiency, and control within an organisation. It ensures that decisions are made by those who have the authority to implement them, and that employees understand their roles and responsibilities. This pattern of communication is typically organised in a vertical structure, with clear lines of communication and decision-making authority. It is often associated with a culture of compliance and conformity, where employees follow orders and expectations without questioning them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspiration for upward mobility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is very important for me to progress upward in this organisation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel free to discuss the problems and difficulties of my job with my immediate supervisor without jeopardising my position or having it count against me later.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Withholding information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I provide my immediate supervisor with a small amount of the total information I receive at work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 2 3 4 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selective disclosure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When transmitting information to my immediate supervisor, I often emphasise those aspects that make me look good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Satisfaction with communication**

In general, I am satisfied with the pattern of communication between my supervisor and I.

1 2 3 4 5

**Arbitrary norms (to be considered per statement)**

Low = 1–2
Moderate = 3
High = 4–5

supervisor to employee and upwards from employee to supervisor. Supervisors provide job instructions, job rationale, organisational procedures and practices, feedback about performances, official memos, policy statements and instillation of organisational goals. Employees communicate information upwards about themselves, co-workers and their problems, organisational practices and policies, and what needs to be done and how to do it. Timely and valid hierarchical communication can promote individual and organisational success.

In many companies hierarchical communication turns out to be highly problematic. Sometimes communication is non-existent, for example when it comes to telling employees about changes that are about to happen. When the information leaks (as it invariably will), such information can be damaging to morale, cause stress, as well as the departure of the most valuable people.

Another potential problem is communication distortion which occurs when an employee purposely modifies the content of a message, thereby reducing the accuracy of communication between managers and employees. Distortion tends to increase when supervisors have high upward influence or power (also see Chapter 14). However, these distortions come into a class of their own when used strategically. The standard organisational behaviour literature does not deal with this aspect of behaviour, but it is central in the field of organisational economics, which is concerned with incentives, payoffs, and the information flows associated with these concepts. This aspect is considered at the end of this chapter.

To assess the communication pattern between yourself and your immediate supervisor, please take a moment to complete the next Activity. Think of your current (or last) job when responding to the various items.

The grapevine

Even if supervisors communicate effectively with their employees, people will make use of the grapevine. The term originated from the US Civil War practice of stringing battlefield telegraph lines between trees. Today, the grapevine represents the unofficial communication system of the informal organisation. Information travelling along the grapevine supplements official or formal channels of communication. Although the grapevine can be a source of inaccurate rumours, it functions positively as an early warning sign for organisational changes, a medium for creating organisational culture, a mechanism for fostering group cohesiveness and a way of informally bouncing ideas off others. The grapevine is likely to be more active in organisations where people can communicate more easily and have similar backgrounds, because the grapevine is mainly based on informal social networks.

Contrary to general opinion, the grapevine is not necessarily counterproductive. It can help employees, managers and organisations alike to achieve desired results by helping employees to find the necessary information, certainly when it is not easily available through formal channels, and by relieving anxiety and fulfilling the need for affiliation, which explains why the grapevine is far more active in times of uncertainty and ambiguity. However, information in the grapevine is distorted by loss of detail and exaggeration, possibly adding to uncertainty and anxiety instead of reducing it. Moreover, when organisations fail to fill the gap between the official and unofficial messages quickly and effectively, employees will feel demotivated because it seems like management is not caring for them.

Communication in the grapevine follows predictable patterns (see Figure 4.11). The most frequent pattern is not a single strand or gossip chain but a cluster.
and cluster patterns look similar, the process by which information is passed is very different. People randomly gossip to others in a probability structure. For instance, in Figure 4.11 person A tells persons F and D a piece of information but ignores co-workers B and J. Person A may have done this simply because he or she ran into co-workers F and D in the corridor. In turn, persons F and D randomly discuss this information with others at work. In contrast, the cluster pattern is based on the idea that information is selectively passed from one person to another. People tend to communicate selectively because they know that certain individuals tend to leak or pass information to others, and they actually want the original piece of information to be spread around. For example, Figure 4.11 shows that person A selectively discusses a piece of information with three people, one of whom – person F – tells two others, and then one of those two – person B – tells another. Only certain individuals repeat what they hear when the probability or cluster patterns are operating. People who consistently pass along grapevine information to others are called liaison individuals or ‘gossips’.

Effective managers are able to monitor the pulse of work groups by regularly communicating with known liaison individuals. Organisational moles, however, use the grapevine for a different purpose. They obtain information, often negative, in order to enhance their power and status. They do this by secretly reporting their perceptions and hearsay about the difficulties, conflicts or failure of other employees to powerful members of management. This enables moles to divert attention away from themselves and to appear more competent than others. Organisations can counteract this behaviour and to try to create an open, trusting environment, since organisational moles can destroy teamwork, create conflict and damage productivity.

**Communication differences between men and women**

Differences in the way men and women communicate can create problems that undermine productivity and interpersonal communication. Five commonly observed communication problems between men and women are:
Men are too authoritarian.
Men do not take women seriously.
Women are too emotional.
Men do not accept women as co-workers or bosses.
Women do not speak up enough.

Gender-based differences in communication are partly caused by the linguistic styles used by men and women, whether a person’s characteristic speaking pattern or such features as ‘directness or indirectness, pacing and pausing, word choice, and the use of such elements as jokes, figures of speech, stories, questions and apologies’. These variations are culturally learned and are likely to vary with location (i.e. with national culture). Table 4.4 summarises the differences.

Differences in how men and women communicate may be caused by inherited biological (genetic) differences between the sexes. This perspective (the ‘Darwinian’ perspective or ‘evolutionary psychology’) attributes gender differences in communication to drives, needs and conflict associated with reproductive strategies used by men and women. Men communicate more aggressively, interrupt others more than women and hide their emotions because they have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.4 Communication Differences between Men and Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are happy to ask for information in public situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In decision-making, women are more likely to downplay their certainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to apologise even when they have done nothing wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to accept blame as a way of smoothing awkward situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to temper criticism with positive buffers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to insert unnecessary and unwarranted ‘thank-yous’ in conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to ask ‘What do you think?’ to build consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to allow men to usurp their ideas without protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women use softer voice volume to encourage persuasion and approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women tend to give directions in indirect ways, a technique that may be perceived as confusing, less confident or manipulative by men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

an inherent desire to possess features attractive to women in order to compete with other men for purposes of mate selection and cannot choose to turn off the biologically based determinants of their behaviour.98

In contrast, social role theory argues that girls learn conversational skills and habits that focus on rapport and relationships, whereas boys learn skills and habits that focus on status and hierarchies. Accordingly, women come to view communication as a network of connections in which conversations are negotiations for closeness. This orientation leads women to seek and give confirmation and support more so than men. Men, on the other hand, see conversations as negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand. Accordingly, it is important for men to protect themselves from others’ attempts to put them down or push them around. This perspective increases men’s need to maintain independence and avoid failure.99

The differences in how men and women communicate show some general tendencies, summarised in Table 4.4, even if there are men communicating in a feminine way – and vice versa. In any case, a person’s linguistic style influences perceptions about your confidence, competence and authority. These judgements may, in turn, affect your future job assignments and subsequent promotability.

Evidence about communication patterns

There is a vast literature on communication, some of it full of useful evidence. Here we provide a few samples. For example, an absence of job-related information causes unnecessary stress among employees.100 Upward communication, on the other hand, provides bosses with necessary feedback concerning current organisational issues and problems and day-to-day operations to make effective decisions. It is also a source of feedback for the effectiveness of their downward communication.101

Employees tend to engage in communication distortion because of workplace politics, for strategic reasons or they are driven by a desire to manage impressions or fear of how a supervisor might respond to a message.102 Employees also tend to modify or distort information when they aspire to move upwards and when they do not trust their supervisors.103

Past research about the grapevine has provided the following insights. The grapevine is faster than formal channels; it is about 75 per cent accurate; people rely on it when they are insecure, threatened or faced with organisational changes; and employees use the grapevine to acquire the major part of their workplace information.104 However, these findings may no longer be representative of the grapevine in an era of information and communication technologies.

Today, people are making use of email and instant message systems to exchange informal messages besides traditional informal talks in the coffee corner of the organisation. As a consequence, the informal social network of employees has expanded significantly, making it possible to gossip to anyone and not just to your own social network. It is even possible to post messages anonymously on certain websites so that everybody can see them. Electronic communication is easily misinterpreted. There is no room for subtleties of language or intonation, which makes it more difficult to see whether someone is making a joke, being sarcastic or telling the truth. It is also very easy to copy an email and send it to several other people, which makes it even faster than the traditional grapevine.
CHAPTER 4 PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Application: choosing communication patterns

The evidence suggests generally that timely and pertinent communication is a good idea. However, as we will see in Chapter 10, the organisational structure in place at any one time strongly influences the volume and character of information that must be processed. Indeed the design of organisational structures is itself an exercise in creating (or removing) capacity to process information.

Lots of informal communication goes on alongside formal communication networks. The grapevine or informal communication networks supplement formal communications systems, sometimes being quicker and possibly also more accurate. The proliferation of digital communication means can lead to formalisation, but the channels extend far beyond the reach of organisational systems. One aspect of the informal systems is that they assist in the internal dissemination of hard to formalise information and knowledge, the kind that is full of causal ambiguity of the kind that is crucial to sustaining competitive advantage.\(^{105}\)

Distortion is a fact of organisational life. Politics and strategic behaviour cannot be eradicated. However, one way to address distortion problems if they occur is to remove the factors that drive them – the chances for advancement through political gaming and the availability for financial gain from (distorted) communication and its fellow, opportunistic behaviour.

One application of gender difference evidence is to recommend genderflex, the temporary use of communication behaviours typical of the other gender in order to increase the potential for influence.\(^{106}\) For example, a woman might use sports analogies to motivate a group of males. This approach may increase understanding and sensitivity between the sexes.

Another approach is involving awareness of how linguistic styles work and how they influence our perceptions and judgements. Knowledge of linguistic styles may help ensure that people with valuable insights or ideas get a hearing.

Knowledge of differences in linguistic style can assist in devising methods to ensure everyone’s ideas are heard and given fair credit in any organisational conversation. Similarly, this knowledge can remind members of either sex that the other side has another way of saying the same thing.

4.9 Strategic and asymmetric information

Two overarching perspectives have dominated in this chapter, that of the perceiver, who receives information in some form, and that of the communicator who sends information to a range of receivers. These views only indirectly allow for the possibility that either sender or recipient can be opportunistic, by using or manipulating the information in a way that gives the perceiver or communicator the greatest personal benefit. It is worth noting that if we are members of an organisation we will find ourselves in both roles, even without thinking about it.

The most explicit discussion of this type of issue appears in this chapter, under the heading of ‘barriers to effective communication’. Here the argument is that communication can be wilfully distorted if trust is absent or when communication forms part of a political process in the organisation. The important element not covered in the section on communication distortion is that it may not be random or accidental, but may rather have a motive. Though usually the domain of economists and often part of a course on microeconomics, strategic use of information is an integral part of understanding how people behave in organisations.

This section briefly outlines the two core concepts of information economics as they ally to organisations. The first concept is ‘hidden information’ or adverse selection, which operates before a deal is made (remember that deals are made all the time inside organisations, even if
there is no real market with defined prices and quantities). The second concept, 'hidden action' or **moral hazard**, refers to the actions of the parties after the deal has been made (and if deals are made inside organisations, then they must also be implemented).

### Hidden information

A woman aged 30 years is applying for a job. Her educational background and experience makes her an outstanding candidate. Despite her obvious qualities, the organisation hesitates. One item of information about this woman is hidden; her reproductive plans. For all the hiring manager knows, she might already be pregnant. He would love to ask her about that particular part of her life, but he cannot and anyway, she is unlikely to answer. In the interest of gender equality, many countries in fact ban this type of question. For her part, she is unlikely to reveal her plans, since she has reason to believe that it will reduce her prospects of getting the job if she does.

Organisations are interested in pregnancies because they remove the employee from circulation for extended periods (the latter stages of pregnancy, childbirth itself, maternity leave and subsequent sick leave when the child is sick – as most children are from time to time). Even if the organisation is not required to pay the woman while she is not working, she represents an idle investment in terms of training, knowledge and skills.

This is a case of hidden information or adverse selection. This refers to the time before a contract is signed. The woman has private information about her reproductive plans. Even if the classic early work on hidden information concerned the market for used cars, adverse selection can occur equally well in organisational settings, both when they engage in market transactions as in the example outlined here, and when internal deals are made. You as a manager may be keen to sell your new idea and you might be tempted to downplay the negative sides of it.

### Hidden action

People working in organisations are not monitored all the time. Whether a product development engineer, a lowly office cleaner or a top manager, none are monitored all the time or on all conceivable dimensions of performance. In all cases, monitoring is costly and constant monitoring so much is out of the question. Without monitoring, any of these workers could get away with doing no work and still get their regular salaries.

In most cases there is a little bit of monitoring; for example, a log of attendance (clocking in on arrival in the morning and clocking out in the evening). In addition, co-workers can act as additional informal monitors. If the workload is constant the absence of a person will increase the work the others have to do, with immediate consequences for the absentee.

During the periods without monitoring, the worker can do his or her work (output monitoring is often used) but any spare time is unaccounted for – the managers may not even know there is any time left over. When the actions of subordinates (sometimes called agents) cannot be observed by superiors (sometimes principals), there is a case of hidden action (or inaction) or moral hazard. This expression comes from the insurance industry, where having insurance subtly changes behaviour to being more risky. However, the implications of hidden action have been known for centuries. For example, Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 has little faith in joint stock companies (precursors for modern corporations) because managers’ actions were to a degree hidden from stock owners (shareholders). The problem persists to this day.
The twin problems of hidden information and hidden action can be uncovered in endless organisational contexts. Both formal structure and organisational culture can moderate the effects. The use of steep performance incentives, on the other hand, can lead to unfortunate results. This is discussed in the context of motivation in Chapters 5 and 6.

Evidence about asymmetric information

Evidence about adverse selection mechanisms at work inside organisations is rare. One study found that in an experimental setting the adverse selection model can be used to explain why projects are sometimes continued despite indications that they are failing. However, the effects of adverse selection declined when project outcomes became strongly negative. Managers responsible for the failing project can also be viewed as being affected by the 'escalation of commitment' tendency discussed in Chapter 13.

Evidence about moral hazard, caused by 'hidden action' is almost as difficult to come by. One of the situations in which moral hazard is believed to exist is in the structure of top managers' pay. Managers can reduce shareholder value in a number of ways, including selling assets below their market value, insufficient disclosure of pertinent information, tolerating high costs, and pursuing various personal objectives such as increased compensation, diversification and merger activity, that misuse free cash flow. A study of situations where the interests of top managers had supposedly been aligned with those of shareholders, found that the commonly adopted instrument, stock options, can indeed work to reduce moral hazard, but that once these options can be exercised, they can lead to an overstatement of short-term financial performance of the firm they lead, regardless of whether these statements are in fact fraudulent or not. This study relied on the concept of 'CEO duality', that is, when the CEO is also chair of the board and on the extent to which board members themselves received stock options and showed (among other things) that a 'president and CEO' combined with a board holding stock options and no CEO stock options significantly increased the likelihood that fraudulent reporting would occur. Giving the CEO stock options then reduces the likelihood of fraud.

At its core both adverse selection and moral hazard is a question of information and communication. It might be described as an overlay of opportunism on top (or mixed into) the communication and perception process. The consequences of asymmetric information for motivation policies and instruments are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Critical thinking

Is the economists' way of thinking about information consistent with that of OB scholars?

4.10 Dynamics of modern communication

Effective communication is the cornerstone of survival in today's competitive business environment. This is particularly true for companies that operate or compete worldwide or those undertaking significant organisational change. Those who use information technology effectively are more likely to contribute to organisational success. We conclude this chapter on communication with
some relevant issues for modern communication. We also elaborate a contingency approach for choosing communication media and focus on how to deal with the huge amount of information that is available to us.

**Communication in the computerised information age**

Just as the personal computer has revolutionised the workplace since the 1980s, recent developments in information and communication technology has created a revolution in organisations. As a result, communication patterns at work are changing radically. The workplace is no longer constrained by geography, time and organisational boundaries.

The **Internet** is a public network of computer networks, whereas an **Intranet** is nothing more than an organisation’s private Internet. Intranets have firewalls that block outside Internet users from accessing internal information. This is done to protect the privacy and confidentiality of company documents. Hence, Intranet systems provide organisations with the advantage of Internet technology to disseminate organisational information and enhance communication between employees, while still maintaining system security. Organisations use the Intranet, for instance, for policy manuals, employee benefits information, job openings or standard company documents. In contrast to the internal focus of an Intranet, an **Extranet** is an extended Intranet in that it connects internal employees with selected customers, suppliers and other strategic partners. The Ford Motor Company, for instance, has an Extranet that connects its dealers worldwide. Ford’s Extranet was set up to help support the sales and servicing of cars and to enhance customer satisfaction.

The primary benefit of the Internet, Intranets and Extranets is that they can enhance the ability of employees to find, create, manage and distribute information. The effectiveness of these ‘Nets’, however, depends on how organisations set up and manage their Intranet/Extranet and how employees use the acquired information – because information by itself is never more than a means to an end. For example, communication effectiveness can actually decrease if a corporate Intranet becomes a dumping ground for disorganised information. In this case, employees will find themselves drowning in a sea of information.

**Electronic mail** or email uses the Internet/Intranet to send computer-generated text and documents between people. Email is a major communication medium throughout the world because of three key benefits:

- Email reduces the cost of distributing information to a large number of employees.
- Email is a tool for increasing teamwork. It enables employees to quickly send messages to colleagues on the next floor, in another building or even in another country.
- Email fosters flexibility. Employees can log onto the Internet and Intranets whenever and wherever they want.

In spite of these positive benefits, there are three key drawbacks to consider. Information overload is a major drawback of email, as is impoliteness and communication shifting. This can, in turn, lead to ‘disconnection’ from the interpersonal interactions at work.

Videoconferencing uses video and audio links along with computers to enable people who are located at different locations to see, hear and talk to each other. This enables people from many locations to conduct a meeting without having to travel.
In the 1990s many organisations set up special videoconferencing rooms or booths with specially equipped TV cameras. More modern equipment enables people to attach small webcams and microphones to their desks or computer monitors, which reduces the cost of videoconferencing significantly. This enables employees to conduct long-distance meetings and training classes without leaving their office. Other applications of videoconferencing are, for instance, medical specialists that diagnose and supervise surgery or lecturers that give courses to student at different locations throughout the world.

The arrival of new technologies such as instant messaging, Internet-based telephony with video, and so on and cheap webcams has changed the opportunities for this type of work – and for distance work generally, dramatically.

Telecommuting, also known as teleworking, involves doing office work away from the office, using a variety of information technologies. Telecommuting involves receiving and sending work from a remote location, even if the telephone is only part of the technology.

Choosing media: a contingency perspective

Media selection is a key component of communication effectiveness. If an inappropriate medium is used, decisions may be based on inaccurate information, important messages may not reach the intended audience and employees may become dissatisfied and unproductive. We propose a contingency model that is designed to help people select communication media in a systematic and effective manner. Media selection in this model is based on the interaction between information richness and the complexity of the problem or situation at hand.

Information richness has been defined as ‘the information carrying capacity of data. If the communication of an item of data, such as a wink, provides substantial new understanding, it would be considered rich. If the datum provides little understanding, it would be low in richness’.116

Information richness refers to the information-carrying capacity of a medium, which means the volume and variety of information that can be transmitted. As this definition implies, alternative media possess levels of information richness that vary from high to low.

Information richness is determined by four factors:

- Feedback (ranging from fast to very slow).
- Channel (ranging from the combined visual and audio characteristics of a videoconference to the limited visual aspects of a computer report).
- Type of communication (ranging from personal to impersonal).
- Language source (ranging from the natural body language and speech contained in a face-to-face conversation to the numbers contained in a financial report).

Face-to-face contact is the richest form of communication. It provides immediate feedback, which serves as a comprehension check and makes it possible to customise the information exchange to the situation. Moreover, multiple communication channels, like verbal and non-verbal ones, are used simultaneously. Although high in richness, telephone and videoconferencing are not as informative as the face-to-face medium. In contrast, newsletters, computer reports and emails possess the lowest richness. Feedback for these media is very slow, the channels involving only limited visual information and the information provided being generic or impersonal.
Organisational situations and problems range from low to high in complexity. Low complexity situations are routine, predictable and are managed by using objective or standard procedures. These situations are straightforward and have a minimum of ambiguity. Calculating an employee’s pay is an example of low complexity. Highly complex situations, like a corporate reorganisation, are ambiguous, unpredictable, hard to analyse and often emotion-laden. Professionals spend considerably more time analysing these situations because they rely on more sources of information during their deliberations. There are no set solutions to complex problems or situations.

The contingency model for selecting media is graphically depicted in Figure 4.12 Effective communication occurs when the richness of the medium is matched appropriately with the complexity of the problem or situation. Media low in richness – impersonal static or personal static – are better suited to simple problems, while media high in richness – interactive media or face-to-face – are appropriate for complex problems or situations.

Conversely, ineffective communication occurs when the medium is either too rich or insufficiently rich for the complexity of the problem or situation. For example, a district sales manager would fall into the overload zone if he or she communicated monthly sales reports through face-to-face meetings or telephoning each salesperson (both rich media forms), would provide excessive information and would take more time than necessary to communicate monthly sales data. The oversimplification zone represents ineffective choice of communication medium used to communicate complicated problems. An example would be an executive who uses a letter or an email message to communicate news of a merger or a major reorganisation. This choice of medium is ineffective because employees are likely to be nervous and concerned about how a
merger or reorganisation will affect their futures. Choosing the wrong medium in this situation will lead to misunderstanding and accordingly take a longer time to resolve things.

Helpful questions to select the most appropriate medium to deliver your message are for instance:

- How much information do I have to transmit?
- Is speed of importance?
- Is feedback needed?
- Does the message require deeper elaboration?
- Which media are certainly inappropriate for delivering the message?

Sometimes it can be necessary to use multiple media to convey your message effectively.

Dealing with information overload

People do not have an infinite capacity to process this information. Herbert Simon was the first to introduce the concept of bounded rationality, referring to the finding that people have limited cognitive abilities to process information (see Chapters 1 and 13). When the information we have to work with exceeds our processing capacity, this results in information overload. The current diversity of communication media and technologies and the pressure to compete globally means that more and more people feel overwhelmed by too much information and are unable to respond adequately to all the messages that reach them or to make adequate decisions with the available information.

Evidence about the dynamics of communication

Information overload is a serious problem in many organisations, leading to a decrease in productivity; some even use the metaphor ‘information obesity’. In the past, the challenge was to find enough information, while now the challenge is to find the most relevant, meaningful, contextualised information to turn it into useful knowledge and wisdom. Managing information effectively within the organisation has become critically important because it provides a basis for gaining a competitive advantage.119

What happens when people have to deal with too much information? They select or ignore information; they forget things or pass them over to others. The amount of information that is available makes it difficult to discriminate between useless and useful information. The consequence is that a lot of information is screened out, which means that it is not even decoded. This leads to ineffective communication, a loss of information and inadequate decisions. Research shows that the decision-making performance of individuals correlates positively with the information available, up to a certain point. If more information is provided beyond this point, performance starts to decline and the information is no longer integrated in the decision-making process. The burden of too much information available confuses the person, affects the ability to set priorities and makes prior information harder to recall.120

Information overload also is a common source of workplace stress (see Chapter 9). A basic condition of human well-being is that the challenges we face match our skills to handle them. If the challenges become higher (as in a situation of information overload), we feel anxious, even
fatigued and in a situation of loss of control. Symptoms like exhaustion, anxiety, failure of memory and shortness of attention are characteristic of this condition. Information overload also puts us under pressure to multitask, which means doing several tasks simultaneously: for example, talking on the phone while reading and writing emails. This leads to an inability to focus and makes us easily feel frustrated.

Application of communication dynamics

Solutions to deal with information overload in organisations can be introduced at the individual but also at the organisational level. Some organisations, for instance, encourage their employees to send fewer emails or discourage the use of the word ‘urgent’ when sending mails. Solutions to solve information overload can focus on two different aspects: increasing the information-processing capacity of people or reducing the information load that reaches people. Just like mentioned earlier, netiquette rules can help to develop an organisational policy for effective email writing and use; solutions to deal with information overload can be integrated in an organisational policy (see Table 4.5).

This also implies setting a time limit for how long you will search for information. It is easy to keep on searching and finding more and more information, even if you already have enough.

Table 4.5 Developing an Organisational Policy to Counter Information Overload

- Make use of an exception principle to regulate the information flow. This means that only exceptions or deviations from policies or procedures should be reported. Is it really necessary to everyone of the department when reporting on the status of a project? Think twice before forwarding an article, interesting website or joke to colleagues. Do they really need this?
- Provide abstracts or summaries instead of entire documents if you want to inform a colleague of something. The entire document can be delivered later on when useful
- Make use of human interventions, like personal assistants, to select your messages. Only those documents or messages that are essential are forwarded
- Install filters to banish unwanted junk mail (called spam) from mailboxes
- Make use of Intranet systems to store information that can be useful for multiple users. This will reduce the number of emails that are sent within organisations. Intranet also increases the access of employees to information
- Stimulate people to use all kind of folders on their PC or files in their desk to store information that they need later on without considering it immediately. People often have the tendency to try to process all information that reaches them immediately, even if they cannot use it at that moment. This also means creating folders in their mailbox to move low-priority emails to be dealt with when they have time to do so
- Promote information literacy in individuals via appropriate training. Information literacy refers to the ability to access, evaluate and use information of a variety of sources. The key to information management is focusing on the quality of the data you receive.

The necessary steps for information literacy are:

- To learn to articulate the information you need (this means, for instance, understanding your goals and priorities).
- To develop a sourcing strategy for finding the information you need (for instance, identifying potential sources, including books, articles, databases, people with expertise in that matter, and common keywords concerning the information you are looking for).
Learning outcomes: Summary of key terms

1 Antecedents influencing the perceptual process
   Three groups of antecedents influence our perception. The first important group refers to the features of the perceived target. Some stimuli attract more attention than others. Novelty, brightness, dominance in the visual field, unusual behaviour and functioning of the target are attention-drawing characteristics. We perceive a target as a whole rather than the sum of its constituents. Perceptual grouping is the tendency which leads us to perceive objects as well-organised patterns rather than separate components. Four main factors determine perceptual grouping: continuity, closure, proximity and similarity. A second important group of antecedents affecting the perceptual process is labelled as ‘setting’. The setting in which the interaction between perceiver and perceived target takes place influences the perception. Cultural context, for example, may be of great relevance in understanding the formation of perceptions. Finally, some features associated with the perceiver are an important group of antecedents (e.g. mood, gender, personality, attitudes, etc.)

2 Perception in terms of the social information processing model
   Perception is a mental and cognitive process that enables us to interpret and understand our surroundings. Social perception, also known as social cognition and social information processing, is a four-stage process. The four stages are selective attention/comprehension, encoding and simplification, storage and retention, and retrieval and response. During social cognition, salient stimuli are matched with schemata, assigned to cognitive categories and stored in long-term memory for events, semantic materials or people.

3 Implications of social perception
   Social perception affects hiring decisions and performance appraisals. Inaccurate or racist and sexist schemata may be used to evaluate job applicants. Similarly, faulty schemata about what constitutes good versus poor performance can lead to inaccurate performance appraisals. Invalid schemata need to be identified and replaced with appropriate schemata through coaching and training. Further, professionals are advised to use objective rather than subjective measures of performance.

4 Correspondent inference theory
   The correspondent inference theory describes how an alert perceiver infers another’s intentions and personal dispositions from his or her behaviour. This theory explains how we use others’ behaviour as a cornerstone for inferring their stable dispositions. The chance that a disposition is derived from a perceived slice of behaviour is dependent on three factors – non-common effects, social desirability of effects and degree of choice.

5 Formulation of external and internal causal attributions
   Attribution theory attempts to describe how people infer causes for observed behaviour. According to Kelley’s covariation model, external attributions tend to be made when consensus, consistency and distinctiveness are high or when consensus and consistency are low and distinctiveness high. Internal (personal responsibility) attributions tend to be made when consensus and distinctiveness are low and consistency is high.

6 The self-fulfilling prophecy and its use
   The self-fulfilling prophecy, also known as the Pygmalion effect, describes how people behave so that their expectations come true. High expectations foster high employee self-expectations.
These, in turn, lead to greater effort and better performance, and yet higher expectations. Conversely, the set-up-to-fail syndrome represents the negative side of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Professionals are encouraged to harness the Pygmalion effect by building a hierarchical framework that reinforces positive performance expectations throughout the organisation.

7 **The perceptual process model of communication**

Communication is a process of consecutively linked elements. Historically, this process was described in terms of a conduit model. Criticisms of this model led to the development of a perceptual process model of communication that depicts receivers as information processors who create the meaning of messages in their own mind. Because receivers’ interpretations of messages often differ from those intended by senders, miscommunication is a common occurrence. Noise refers to anything that interferes with the transmission and understanding of a message. Communication occurs on two separate but interrelated levels – the content and the relationship level – and needs to be interpreted in the context wherein it takes place.

8 **Barriers to effective communication**

Every element of the perceptual model of communication is a potential process barrier. There are eight personal aspects that commonly become a barrier for effective communication: (a) the ability to communicate effectively; (b) the way people process and interpret information; (c) the level of interpersonal trust between people; (d) the existence of stereotypes and prejudice; (e) the egos of the people communicating; (f) the inability to listen; (g) the natural tendency to evaluate or judge a sender’s message; and (h) the inability to listen with understanding.

Physical barriers pertain to distance, physical objects, time, and work and office noise. Semantic barriers show up as encoding and decoding errors because these phases of communication involve transmitting and receiving words and symbols. Cultural diversity is a key contributor to semantic barriers.

9 **Oral, written and non-verbal communication skills**

Oral communication refers to all verbal communication that is spoken. It is fast and allows for immediate feedback. Written communication refers to all kinds of verbal communication that is written. Written communication makes information distribution to a lot of people possible; it is tangible and can be verified easily. Body movements and gestures, touch, facial expressions and eye contact are important non-verbal cues. The interpretation of these non-verbal cues varies significantly across cultures.

10 **Listener comprehension and listening styles**

Listening is the process of actively decoding and interpreting verbal messages. Characteristics of the listener, speaker, message and environment influence listener comprehension. Communication experts identified three unique listening styles. A results-style listener likes to hear the bottom line or result of a message at the beginning of a conversation. Reasons-style listeners want to know the rationale for what someone is saying or proposing. Process-style listeners like to discuss issues in detail. Good listeners use the following 10 listening habits: (a) capitalise on thought speed by staying with the speaker and listening between the lines; (b) listen for ideas rather than facts; (c) identify areas of interest between the speaker and listener; (d) judge content and not delivery; (e) do not judge until the speaker has completed his or her message; (f) put energy and effort into listening; (g) resist distractions; (h) listen to both favourable and unfavourable information; (i) read or listen to complex material to exercise the mind; and (j) take notes when necessary and use visual aids to enhance understanding.
11 Communication styles
An assertive style is expressive and self-enhancing but does not violate other people’s basic human rights. In contrast, an aggressive style is expressive and self-enhancing but takes unfair advantage of others. A non-assertive style is characterised by timid and self-denying behaviour. An assertive communication style is more effective than either an aggressive or non-assertive style. Assertiveness is important when giving criticism, making clear requests and saying no to requests of others.

12 Hierarchical communication
Hierarchical communication patterns describe exchanges of information between supervisors and their employees. Supervisors provide five types of downward communication: job instructions, job rationale, organisational procedures and practices, feedback about performance, and indoctrination of goals. Employees communicate information upwards about themselves, co-workers and their problems, organisational practices and policies, and what needs to be done and how to do it. The grapevine is the unofficial communication system of the informal organisation. Communication along the grapevine follows four predictable patterns: single strand, gossip, probability and cluster. The cluster pattern is the most common.

13 Asymmetric information
When information about important decisions is unevenly distributed the opportunity for opportunistic exploitation of this asymmetry arises. Situations of asymmetric information can involve adverse selection (hidden information about one part to an agreement or contract) or moral hazard (hidden action by one part to an agreement after it has been made). Contracts, both formal ones and implicit ones, can be structured to reduce or avoid information asymmetries.

14 The contingency approach to media selection
Selecting media is a key component of communication effectiveness. Media selection is based on the interaction between the information richness of a medium and the complexity of the problem/situation at hand. Information richness ranges from low to high and is a function of four factors: speed of feedback, characteristics of the channel, type of communication and language source. Problems/situations range from simple to complex. Effective communication occurs when the richness of the medium matches the complexity of the problem at hand. Richer media need to be used as situations become more complex.

15 Information overload
Our ‘Information Age’ leads to an ever-increasing amount of information. When the information exceeds our information processing capacity, this results in information overload. Information overload leads to decreased productivity, ineffective communication, loss of information, inadequate decisions and workplace stress. Solutions to deal with information overload in organisations can be introduced at the individual level but also at the organisational level. These solutions can focus on two different aspects: increasing the information-processing capacity of people or reducing the information load that reaches people.
Personal awareness and growth exercise

Assessing your listening skills

Objectives
1. To assess your listening skills.
2. To develop a personal development plan aimed at increasing your listening skills.

Introduction
Listening is a critical component of effective communication. Unfortunately, research and case studies suggest that many of us are not very good at actively listening. This is particularly bad in light of the fact that people spend more time listening than they do speaking or writing. This exercise provides you with the opportunity to assess your listening skills and develop a plan for improvement.

Review questions

1. Why is perception and attribution important?
2. When you are sitting in your course group, what stimuli are salient? What is your schema for course group activity?
3. A fellow student starts arguing in class with your lecturer. How would you formulate an attribution, according to Kelley’s model?
4. In what situations do you tend to attribute your successes/failures to luck?
5. When did you last have trouble decoding a message – and what caused the problem?
6. Describe noises that interfere with communications you are trying to receive.
7. Explain which barrier to effective communication you think is most difficult to reduce?
8. Give some examples of non-verbal communication you have registered?
9. How would you describe your prevailing communication style?
10. Have you ever experienced gender differences concerning communication?
11. Is communication overload, effective communication or oversimplification most common in today’s large organisations?
12. Have you ever felt overwhelmed with information?
**Instructions**
The following statements reflect various habits we use when listening to others. For each statement, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with it by selecting one number from the scale provided. Circle your response for each statement. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. After completing the survey, add up your total score for the 17 items and record it in the space provided.

**Listening skills survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale 1</th>
<th>Scale 2</th>
<th>Scale 3</th>
<th>Scale 4</th>
<th>Scale 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I daydream or think about other things when listening to others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not mentally summarise the ideas being communicated by a speaker.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not use a speaker’s body language or tone of voice to help interpret what he or she is saying.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I listen more for facts than overall ideas during classroom lectures.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I tune out dry speakers.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a hard time paying attention to boring people.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can tell whether someone has anything useful to say before he or she finishes communicating a message.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I stop listening to a speaker when I think he or she has nothing interesting to say.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get emotional or upset when speakers make jokes about issues or things that are important to me.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get angry or distracted when speakers use offensive words.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not expend a lot of energy when listening to others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I pretend to pay attention to others even when I’m not really listening.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get distracted when listening to others.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I deny or ignore information and comments that go against my thoughts and feelings.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not seek opportunities to challenge my listening skills.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not pay attention to the visual aids used during lectures.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not take notes on handouts when they are provided.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total score = ____________
Preparing a personal development plan

1. Use the following norms to evaluate your listening skills:
   - 17–34 = good listening skills
   - 35–53 = moderately good listening skills
   - 54–85 = poor listening skills

   How would you evaluate your listening skills?

2. Do you agree with the assessment of your listening skills? Why or why not?

3. The 17-item listening skills survey was developed to assess the extent to which you use the keys to effective listening presented in Table 4.1. Use Table 4.1 and the development plan format to prepare your development plan. First, identify the five statements from the listening skills survey that received your highest ratings – high ratings represent low skills. Record the survey numbers in the space provided in the development plan. Next, compare the content of these survey items to the descriptions of bad and good listeners shown in Table 4.1. This comparison will help you identify the keys to effective listening being measured by each survey item. Write down the keys to effective listening that correspond to each of the five items you want to improve. Finally, write down specific actions or behaviours that you can undertake to improve the listening skill being considered.

Development plan

| Survey items | Key to effective listening I want to improve | Action steps required (what do you need to do to build listening skills for this listening characteristic?) |


Group exercise

Practising different styles of communication

Objectives

1. To demonstrate the relative effectiveness of communicating assertively, aggressively and non-assertively.

2. To give you hands-on experience with different styles of communication.

Introduction

Research shows that assertive communication is more effective than either an aggressive or non-assertive style. This role-playing exercise is designed to increase your ability to communicate assertively. Your task is to use different communication styles while attempting to resolve the work-related problems of a poor performer.

Instructions

Form a group of three and read the ‘poor performer’ and ‘store manager’ roles provided here. Then decide who will play the poor performer role, who the managerial role, and who the
observer. The observer will be asked to provide feedback to the manager after each role play. When playing the managerial role, you should first attempt to resolve the problem by using an aggressive communication style. Attempt to achieve your objective by using the non-verbal and verbal behaviour patterns associated with the aggressive style shown in Table 4.2. Take about four to six minutes to act out the instructions. The observer should give feedback to the manager after completing the role play. The observer should comment on how the employee responded to the aggressive behaviours displayed by the manager.

After feedback is provided on the first role play, the person playing the manager should then try to resolve the problem with a non-assertive style. Observers once again should provide feedback. Finally, the manager should confront the problem with an assertive style. Once again, rely on the relevant non-verbal and verbal behaviour patterns presented in Table 4.2, and take four to six minutes to act out each scenario. Observers should try to provide detailed feedback on how effectively the manager exhibited non-verbal and verbal assertive behaviours. Be sure to provide positive and constructive feedback.

After completing these three role plays, switch roles: manager becomes observer, observer becomes poor performer and poor performer becomes manager. When these role plays are completed, switch roles once again.

Role: poor performer
You sell shoes full time for a national chain of shoe stores. Over the past month, you have been absent three times without giving your manager a reason. The quality of your work has been slipping. You have a lot of creative excuses when your boss tries to talk to you about your performance.

When playing this role, feel free to invent a personal problem that you may eventually want to share with your manager. However, make the manager dig for information about this problem. Otherwise, respond to your manager’s comments as you would normally.

Role: store manager
You manage a store for a national chain of shoe stores. In the privacy of your office, you are talking to one of your salespeople who has had three unexcused absences from work during the last month. (This is excessive, according to company guidelines, and must be corrected.) The quality of the person’s work has been slipping. Customers have complained that this person is rude and co-workers have told you this individual is not carrying a fair share of the work. You are fairly sure this person has some sort of personal problem. You want to identify that problem and get him or her back on course.

Questions for discussion
1. What drawbacks of the aggressive and non-assertive styles did you observe?
2. What were major advantages of the assertive style?
3. What were the most difficult aspects of trying to use an assertive style?
4. How important was non-verbal communication during the various role plays? Explain with examples.
Notes

3 British MP Vince Cable, in The Times, 8 February 2009. For a stunning example of how a few words can create an enduring perception of both the speaker’s wit and the target’s character (or lack thereof), see Cable’s ‘Stalin to Mr. Bean’ comment on YouTube. Creating that perception in a few words takes less than 20 seconds.


30 Adapted and translated from M. Buvelens, F. Debusche and K. Vanderheiden, Mensen en verscheidenheid (Brussels: Vacature, 1997).


32 Details of this study can be found in C. K. Stevens, ‘Antecedents of Interview Interactions, Interviewers’ Ratings, and Applicants’ Reactions’, Personnel Psychology, Spring 1998, pp. 55–85.


106 This definition was taken from J. C. Tingley, *Genderflex: Men & Women Speaking Each Other’s Language at Work* (New York: American Management Association, 1994), p. 16.


108 Book V, chapter 1, part III, article I.


115 This conclusion is discussed by O. Edwards, ‘Inflammation Highway’, *Forbes*, 26 February 1996, p. 120.


