

## **Lecture 1: What is communication?**

Communication is as old as life itself. From the moment a new life begins, communication of this new life with its immediate environment begins. Over centuries man has been assigning various names and terminologies to communication based on his experiences with it.

### **What is communication?**

The word *communication* may have its roots in the Latin words ‘communico’ which means ‘to share’ or ‘communis’ which means ‘common’.<sup>1</sup> This means that the act of *communication* requires more than one unit or entity, and something needs to be common between these two or more entities that both need to have some interest in and control over.

The scope of this course limits us to the study of communication among human beings, so we will deal only with human communication in the forthcoming lectures.

Communication among human beings comes up for discussion primarily when problems arise due to a lack of it (Anderson and Ross, 2000; Stewart, 2002). We all know what it is, and we all know what it does for us, and we all try to explain it in our own unique ways. In addition to being a common topic for discussions among people at gatherings ranging from casual banter over cups of hot tea during *addas*<sup>2</sup> at *dhaabas*<sup>3</sup>, to seemingly complex philosophical discussions during high profile social events, over the years, human communication as a concept has been studied and analyzed by a large number of scholars who devoted their lives to understanding human behavior.

Some discussion about the historical background of the field of communication will help set the stage for further discussion on, a clear understanding of, and the development of an interest in the application of communication to managerial and organizational processes, which is the goal of this course.

One of the earliest recorded accounts of the study of human communication dates back to 3000 B.C. when Kagemni, the eldest son of Pharaoh Huni, was instructed on how to speak effectively while discharging his duties as a royal (Gardiner, 1946).

Archeological artifacts from ancient Egypt exhibit descriptions of the ways in which one must behave in order to “...*ingratiate oneself with superiors, how to make a favorable impression, how to flatter superiors, and how to gain the goodwill and approval of the common people...*” (Hertzler, 1933).

“If thou art one of those who are sitting at table with a man who is greater than thyself, accept what he gives thee, what is set before thy nose .... Keep thy face turned downwards until he addresses thee, and speak only when he speaks to thee. Laugh when he laughs. That will be exceedingly pleasing to his mind ....”<sup>4</sup>

And the advice continues ....

At different points of time, communication, the art of communication, the impact of communication, what people did with communication, and so on, continued to be studied primarily with the intention of training royals on how to communicate with their subjects, and with other royals who they entered into trade with.

As time progressed, and the population on the earth increased, the need to share the available resources increased, and the number of conflicts arising out of this need also increased. The period 1200 A.D. onwards saw a marked increase in the number of wars all over the world.<sup>5</sup> With an increase in these conflicts, came a need to study the communication practices that could help the conflicting parties share information among themselves to protect themselves and defeat their enemies.

Edgeworth (1797) studied the art of cryptic communication and swift transference of cryptic information especially during times of conflict. Referring to historical data from war-ridden zones in different parts of the world, he emphasized the importance of designing messages in such a way that meanings would neither be lost nor interpreted easily by enemies, and yet communicated speedily through coordinated physical structures like The Great Wall of China.

People had begun to wonder about why we connected with others in our environments, and what we could accomplish by connecting with different people in different ways, and sharing it either as training to special groups of people (ranging from royals engaged in international trade, to soldiers protecting their countries from enemies), or investigating it just because they wanted to know. People began to observe each other at different stages of their lives. Mothers had always ‘known’ how to train their children to speak. Now the fathers got interested as well. Parents started documenting the development of their children in the form of diaries popularly known as baby biographies. People wondered how we learnt to use our communicative apparatus and what happened if we did not use it.

Kirwan (1806) discussed the significance of feedback in the development of our physiological capacities for communication. This, over time, along with other ideas and concepts, led to researchers linking what we learnt from the environment consciously or subconsciously, to how we connected with it.

In 1922, George Herbert Mead proposed the theory of symbolic interactionism, which formed the basis for the modern day concept of the social construction of reality, i.e. we see the world as we, in coordination with the significant others in our environments, choose to see it. According to this theory, what we see around us and what we get from it is largely governed by what we and the people we interact with perceive in it. Our perceptions, in turn, define how we respond to the stimuli coming to us from our environments. This theory focuses largely on the role of our intra-personal contexts or environments in the selection of sense making stimuli from the plethora of stimuli our environments presented to us. This in turn was instrumental in determining our behaviors in our environments, which in turn determined how the environment responded to our responses to its stimuli, and so on.

The importance of *frames of reference* or *contexts* grew as researchers delved further into their quest for understanding this very complex process of communication. Researchers started getting together, and they started discussing what communication meant, and what it could and could not 'do', and what affected how it shaped up, and what affected what it could and could not be used to achieve and effect, and so on. They realized that *communication* was a field of research by itself, and had to be studied as a separate discipline, complete with its categorizations, and limitations, and evolution. Researchers also realized that even though *communication* as a field could not be limited to a single sentence definition, they needed to define some boundaries and assign some identifiable shape to the discipline.

In 1969, Dr. Frank E. X. Dance, Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, undertook the task of making some sense of this chaos. He studied ninety-five published definitions of communication, and identified three main categories based on the conceptual similarities between them, namely, "(1) the level of observation, (2) the presence or absence of intent on the part of the sender, and (3) the normative judgment of the act" (Dance, 1970, in Dance, 1984), i.e. what we see communication as (observation – so the definitions would focus primarily on 'communication *is* ....'), why people communicate (intent – so the definitions would focus primarily on '[we/ people] communicate *because*....'), and what people felt about the impact of the communicative event (normative judgment of the event – so the definitions would focus primarily on 'communication *results in* ....').

As a result of this analysis, Dance (1970) came up with a comprehensive definition which seems to be the perfect fit for this web course. According to Dance (1970), communication is "... the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavour to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation."

According to this definition, the 'something' the interactants found common among themselves is information that is shared, exchanged, and interpreted by two or more entities. These two entities may be two points of view, two people, a person and a machine, or a combination of a person, a machine and a point of view. The process of communication involves the presence of entities, information, and an act of transforming this information into something that can be used by the entities in a particular situation. Now, a third element comes into the picture – two or more entities, a piece of information, and a situation, and a process going on between the three.

Dance (1984) pointed towards two major conceptual aspects of the process of communication – the 'transference of information' or 'interaction', and the presence of a human being who is involved in this transference. This interaction, according to Dance (1984) happens within the frame of reference of a particular situation. Since information is intangible, i.e. it cannot be touched, the perceptions of the sender and receiver determine what exactly changes hands.

Over the years, researchers refined these definitions, refuted them, built upon them, and proposed a wide range of modifications and new ideas focusing on different aspects of communication.

The one aspect that continued to gain importance in these definitions, however, was *context*, and its role in the creation and interpretation of messages that were exchanged between people.

Bakhtin (1993) discussed the relationship between content and context in the experience of an utterance – a basic unit of communication. He stressed that "...the emotional volitional aspect of an utterance" was transmitted with it, and that "...it is [was] the whole experience of an utterance that gives [gave] the utterance its meaning and life and separates[d] it from the unnatural and mechanical. " He suggested that the content of an utterance – a basic unit of communication, acquires meaning only through the emotions associated with it, and the intentions involved in designing the message, and these emotions and intentions of the creator of every unit of a message are transmitted along with the message. He also suggested that the primary difference between a human utterance and a mechanically transmitted message was the entire human experience of the creation of a message, with the need for the message to get something done (intent or volition), and with some emotions (of the creator of the

message) associated with that particular unit of the message, perceived by the receiver of the message within his own emotions and intentions.

In 2002, Stewart proposed a definition that nails the matter on its head. According to this definition,

“Communication is the continuous, complex, collaborative process of verbal and non-verbal meaning making through which we construct the worlds of meaning we inhabit.”

According to this definition, communication involves continuous collaboration among the parties that interact in an effort to make meanings verbally and non verbally. These meanings, in turn, help us make sense of our environment and understand it.

All of the above descriptions and definitions emphasize similar aspects of the concept of communication, i.e. participants or interactants, a situation or a context, some information that has a meaning within that particular context, a process that involves continuous exchange and interpretation of this information among the interactants.

These definitions will be referred to and become clearer when we discuss the models of communication in the next lecture.

Now let us move on to why we communicate.

### Why do human beings communicate?

Various theories have been proposed to explain why we communicate.

Mead (1922) proposes that we assign ‘symbols’ or meanings to the signals coming to us from our environments, and respond to these signals based on the way we have assigned symbols to them. What does this mean? This means, that any time the stability in our internal or external environments is disturbed, we respond to the environment. In the definitions discussed earlier, we talked about the presence of two entities in communication. One might ask that if the stimulus were internal e.g. hunger, or thirst, what might the communication look like. In this case, for example, the two entities would be the stomach, and the thought process in our brain wherein we subconsciously ask ourselves what might we be feeling. So, when the stomach contracts, for example, what is it that one would classify that physical contraction of the stomach as – hunger or thirst, and what can one do to take care of what one is feeling, i.e. if it is thirst, will water help or is the craving for something sweet and liquidy, and what should the temperature of this drink be, and so on.

The point here is that this very basic feeling of hunger or thirst results in a thought process, which can be categorized as communication.

Abraham Maslow (1954) discusses the behavioral motivation of needs, which, in line with Mead's (1922) explanation, can be used to understand why human beings communicate and what they hope to achieve with the way they communicate.

According to Maslow (1954), the behavior of human beings is motivated by needs, which are further layered into a five layer hierarchy, comprising of *Physiological, Safety, Social, Self-Esteem, and Self-Actualization needs*, in that order. Maslow (1954) believes that the motivation for the behavior of human beings is governed by the layer-wise satisfaction of these needs, with Physiological Needs forming the lowest layer, and Self-Actualization forming the top layer. This means that human beings behave in ways that satisfy the upper layers of this hierarchy only after their needs in the lower layers have been met. Combining Maslow's theory of behavioral motivation of needs and Mead's theory of communication as a response to stimuli, we conclude that the different levels of the hierarchy of needs serve to prioritize different stimuli coming to us from our environments, and result in communication that serves to address them according to these perceived priorities.

Dance, in Dance and Larson (1972), provides a different view of the reasons why human beings communicate. He proposes that communication among human beings serves three primary purposes:

- "(1) Linking of the individual with his environment,
- (2) development of higher mental processes, and
- (3) regulation of behavior." (Dance, in Dance and Larson, 1972)

Dance (in Dance and Larson, 1972) proposes that human beings communicate to connect with their environments through the exchange of messages that can be understood and accepted by the people they exchange messages with and vice-versa. The second reason Dance (in Dance and Larson, 1972) proposes as the reason for human communication is the discovery of newer patterns of thought in and through communication between various points of view in our minds, which leads to the development of more complex mental process. This is effected through reason, critical thinking, intuitiveness, and intrigue. The third reason Dance (in Dance and Larson, 1972) suggests we communicate is for the regulation of behavior through feedback from our internal and external environments.

Barbara Wood (1981) in the context of children and child development, proposes that we communicate "...to make sense of our worlds." i.e. we communicate to understand

our environments by sending out signals into our environments and using the feedback from our environments to understand what different things in our environments mean.

Despite the diversity and volume of the reasons for communication, one can safely conclude that *communication* is not something that happens in isolation. Something in the environment is always responsible for the initiation of the process of communication. And once that purpose is met, the reason for and the meaning of a unit of communication loses its significance, and a new reason for and meaning of a new unit of communication surfaces, and the process goes on.

### Conclusion

This lecture provides a very brief, birds-eye view of the very diverse, very vast field of communication. The primary purpose of the information provided in this lecture is to generate interest in *communication* as a concept, and acknowledge the various forms it can take.

To summarize, *communication* is a *process* which involves the coming together of two or more *entities* in a particular *context* or *situation* where these entities exchange some *information* to which they ascribe some *meaning*, with or without the intention of *acting* upon it, or *intending* that the people this information is exchanged with act upon it. Communication does not happen in isolation. Something always precedes it in the form of a *stimulus*, and something always results from it in the form of a *response*. The *meaning* drawn or interpreted from the experience of a communicative or *interactive* situation depends upon the *context* of the people involved in the interactive experience.

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Questions:

1. Discuss the differences in your own understanding of communication before and after reading this lecture.
2. How do you think communication is influenced by context?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Latin = English Dictionary (April, 23, 1997).

<http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/Latin/>. Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> sept 2012

<sup>2</sup> *Adda* is a Bengali word that refers to “informal intellectual exchanges among the middle class intelligentsia” usually at roadside tea stalls, and usually lasting for several hours. (Ref: Wikipedia.com)

<sup>3</sup> *Dhaaba* is a Hindi word that refers to a roadside food stall, which, in addition to serving local food, often serves as a place to meet casually and discuss the problems of the world.

<sup>4</sup> Precept (VII) in Hertzler (1933).

<sup>5</sup> Timeline of Wars. Retrieved 25 September 2012 from <http://www.history-timelines.org.uk/events-timelines/24-timeline-of-war.htm>.