

Lesson:-14

C'HOICE OF COMMUNIC-ATION CHANNEL

Neal L. *Patterson* CEO at medical-software maker Cerner Corp. likes e-mail. Maybe too much so. Upset with his staffs work *ethical* he recently sent a seething e-mail to his firm's 400 managers.²¹ Here are some of that e-mail. highlights:

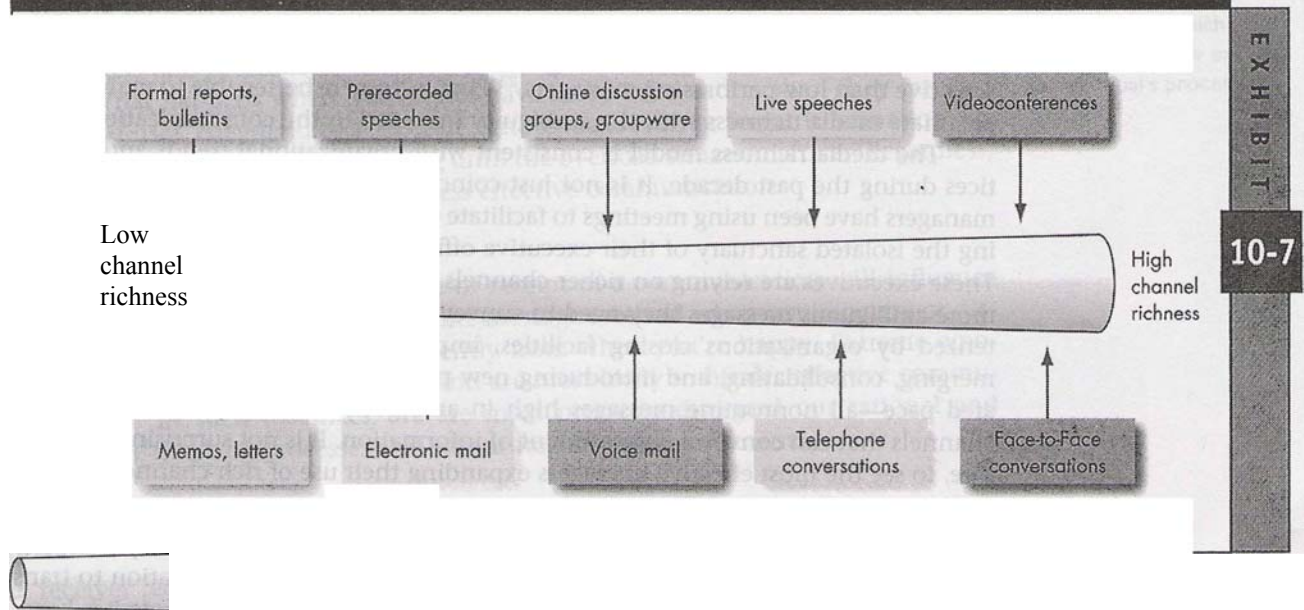
Hell will freeze over before this CEO implements ANOTHER EMPLOYEE benefit in this Culture. . . . We are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our Kansas City-based employees. The parking lot is sparsely used at 8 A.M.; likewise at 5 P.M. As managers-you either do not know what your EMPLOYEES are doing; or YOU do not CARE. . . . You have a problem and you will fix it or I will replace you. . . . What you are *doing* as managers, with this company makes me SICK.”

Patterson's e-mail additionally suggested that managers schedule meetings at 7 A.M., 6 P.M., and Saturday mornings; promised a staff reduction of five percent and institution of a time-clock system, and Patterson's intention to charge unapproved absences to employees' vacation time. Within hours of this e-mail, copies of it had made its way onto a Yahoo! Web site. And within three days, Comer's stock price had plummeted 22 percent. Although one can argue about whether such harsh criticism should be communicated at all, one thing is certainly clear: Patterson erred by selecting the wrong channel for his message. Such an emotional and sensitive message would likely have been better received in a face-to-face meeting.

Why do people choose one channel of communication over another-for instance, a phone call instead of a face-to-face talk? Is there any general insight we might be able to provide regarding choice of communication channel? The answer to the latter question is a qualified *Yes./1* A model of media richness has been developed to explain channel selection among managers.²² Research has found that channels differ in their capacity to convey information. Some are rich in that they have the ability to (1) handle multiple cues simultaneously, (2) facilitate rapid feedback, and (3) be very personal. Others are lean in that they score low on these three factors. As Exhibit 10-7 illustrates, face-to-face conversation scores highest in terms of **channel richness** because it provides for the maximum amount of information to be transmitted during a communication episode. That is, it offers multiple information cues (words, postures, facial expressions, gestures, intonations), immediate feedback (both verbal and nonverbal), and the personal touch of "being there./1 Impersonal written media such as formal reports and bulletins rate lowest in richness.

The choice of one channel over another depends on whether the message is routine or no routine. The former types of messages tend to be straightforward and have a minimum of ambiguity. The latter are likely to be complicated and have the potential for misunderstanding. Managers can communicate routine

Information Richness of Communication Channels



Source: Based on R. H. Lengel and D. L. Daft, "The Selection of Communication Media as an Executive Skill," *Academy of Management Executive*, August 1988, pp. 225-32; and R. L. Daft and R. H. Lengel, "Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness, and Structural Design," *Managerial Science*, May 1996, pp. 554-72. Reproduced from R. L. Daft and R. A. Noe, *Organizational Behavior* (Fort Worth, TX:Harcourt, 2001), p. 311..

OB in the News

<p>Don't Push E-Mail Beyond Its Limits</p> <p>E-mail is fine for some communications but it has its limitations. And, unfortunately, many people are using it to convey messages that are best expressed in other ways.</p> <p>Relationships can suffer when people use e-mail as a substitute for face-to-face conversation or a phone call. For instance, one writer tells of communicating with an editor by e-mail about an article he had written. The relationship turned sour because each was taking the other's comments as far more critical than intended. "We had to get offline and apologize," says the writer.</p>	<p>An expert on communication says, "There's a tremendous overreliance on e-mail, which is leading to a lot of confusion, misunderstanding, anger, and frustration." The "overreliance" factor is due to the popularity of the technology—for instance, in the United States, 55 percent of adults now use e-mail. The negative responses to e-mail are due to its inherent limitations and misuse. These include:</p> <p><i>Low feedback.</i> Conversation is a give-and-take exchange, but e-mail allows one to "talk" at length without any response.</p> <p><i>Reduced social cues.</i> When we talk, we can hear the tone of a joke that might come across as stern on a computer</p>	<p>screen. And emoticons can hint that something is meant lightly but can't replace voice or visual cues.</p> <p><i>Excess attention.</i> E-mail allows people to create carefully worded messages that can be interpreted as more formal than verbal messages. The same words expressed off-handedly in a verbal conversation often take on greater meaning and importance when read in an e-mail.</p> <p><i>Wordiness.</i> E-mail allows the writer to go on forever, often confusing the receiver as to what's important and what isn't. In face-to-face contact, senders get verbal and nonverbal cues—interruptions, quizzical looks, glassy eyes—indicating the message is getting too long.</p>
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Source: Based on J. Kornblum, "E-Mail's Limits Create Confusion, Hurt Feelings," *USA Today*, February 5, 2002, p. 6D.

messages efficiently through channels that are lower in richness. However, they can communicate nonroutine messages effectively only by selecting rich channels. Referring back to our opening example at Cerner Corp., it appears that Neal Patterson's problem was using a channel relatively low in richness (e-mail) to convey a message that, because of its nonroutine nature and complexity, should have been conveyed using a rich communication medium.

Evidence indicates that high-performing managers tend to be more media sensitive than low-performing managers.²³ That is, they're better able to match appropriate media richness with the ambiguity involved in the communication. .

The media richness model is consistent With organizational trends and practices during the past decade. It is not just coincidence that more and more. senior managers have been using meetings to facilitate communication and regularly leaving the isolated sanctuary of their executive offices to marriage by walking around. These executives are relying on richer channels of communication to transmit the more ambiguous messages they need to convey. The past decade has been characterized by organizations closing facilities, imposing large layoffs, restructuring, merging, consolidating, and introducing new products and services at an accelerated pace—all nonroutine messages high in ambiguity and requiring the use of channels that can convey a large amount of information. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the most effective managers expanding their use of rich channels.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

A number of barriers can retard or distort effective communication. In this section, we highlight the more important of these barriers.

Flittering.

Filtering refers to a sender's purposely manipulating information so it will be seen more favorably by the receiver. For example, when a manager tells his boss what he feels his boss wants to hear, he is filtering information.

The major determinant of filtering is the number of levels in an organization's structure. The more vertical levels in the organization's hierarchy, the more opportunities there are for filtering. But you can expect some filtering to occur wherever there are status differences. Factors such as fear of conveying bad news and the desire to please one's boss often lead employees to tell their superiors what they think these superiors want to hear, thus distorting upward communications.

Selective Perception

We have mentioned selective perception before in this book. It appears again here because the receivers in the communication process selectively see and hear based on their needs, motivations, experience, background, and other personal characteristics. Receivers also project their interests and expectations into communications as they decode them. The employment interviewer who expects a female job applicant to put her family ahead of her career is likely to see that in female applicants, regardless of whether the applicants feel that way or not. As we said in Chapter 5, we don't see reality; we interpret what we see and call it reality.

Information Overload

Individuals have a finite capacity for processing data. As noted in our previous discussion of e-mail, when the information we have to work with exceeds our processing capacity, the result is **information overload**. And with e-mails, phone calls, faxes, meetings; and the need to keep current in one's field, more and more managers and professionals are complaining that they're suffering overload.

What happens when individuals have more information than they can sort out and use? They tend to select out, ignore, pass over, or forget information. Or they may put off further processing until the overload situation is over. Regardless, the result is lost information and less effective communication.

Emotions

How the receiver feels at the time of receipt of a communication will influence how he or she interprets it. The same message received when you are angry or distraught is often interpreted differently from when you're happy. Extreme emotions such as

jubilant or depressed are most likely to hinder effective communication. In such instances, we are most prone to disregard our rational and objective thinking processes and substitute emotional judgments.

Language

Words mean different things to different people. Age, education, and cultural background are three of the more obvious variables that influence the language a person uses and the definitions he or she gives to words.

In an organization, employees usually come from diverse backgrounds. Further, the grouping of employees into departments creates specialists *who* develop their own "buzzwords" or technical jargon. In large organizations, members are also frequently widely dispersed geographically—even operating in different countries and individuals in each locale will use terms and phrases that are unique to their area. The existence of vertical levels can also cause language problems. For instance, differences in meaning with regard to words such as *incentives* and *quotas* have been found at different levels in management. Top managers often speak about the need for incentives and quotas, yet these terms imply manipulation and create resentment among many lower managers.

The point is that although you and I probably speak a common language English—our use of that language is far from uniform. If we knew how each of us modified the language, communication difficulties would be minimized. The problem is that members in an organization usually don't know how those with whom they interact have modified the language. Senders tend to assume that the words and terms they use mean the same to the receiver as they do to them. This assumption is often incorrect.

Communication comprehension

Another major barrier to effective communication is that some people—an estimated 5 to 20 percent of the population suffer from debilitating

communication apprehension or anxiety. Although lots of people dread speaking in front of a group, communication apprehension is a more serious problem because it affects a whole category of communication techniques. People who suffer from it experience undue tension and anxiety in oral communication, written communication, or both.²⁵ For example, oral apprehensive may find it extremely difficult to talk with others face to face or become extremely anxious when they have to use the telephone. As a result, they may rely on memos or faxes to convey messages when a phone call would be not only faster but more appropriate.

Studies demonstrate that oral-communication apprehensive avoid situations that require them to engage in oral communication.²⁶ We should expect to find some self-selection in jobs so that such individuals don't take positions, such as teacher, for which oral communication is a dominant requirement.²⁷ But almost all jobs require some oral communication. And of greater concern is the evidence that high-oral-communication apprehensive distort the communication demands of their jobs in order to minimize the

need for communication.²⁸ So we need to be aware that there is a set of people in organizations who severely limit their oral communication and rationalize this practice by telling themselves that more communication isn't necessary for them to do their job effectively.