

Why Does Communication On A Construction Project Often Fail And How Can We Reduce The Failure Rate

A construction project by its nature is highly dependent on effective communication. Most major construction projects are handled by many independent companies each with numerous people handling different roles. Each project is unlike other projects and require different scopes, features, materials and construction methods. The project starts with an owner's needs or wants. It is then architected and molded into a conceptual design and engineered (to?) the required details to meet the owner's scope and needs.

As the design moves forward to construction-ready plans and specifications, is bid and awarded, and becomes a physical project, the need for timely, succinct and effective communication grows exponentially. Many open bi-directional communication paths must be properly managed simultaneously. If at this point we do an inadequate job of communication, our project will suffer in some way.

What Is Successful and Effective Communication

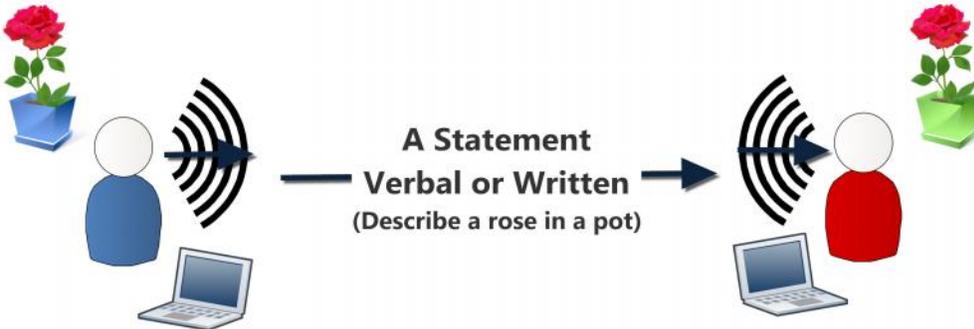


Communication as defined by <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communication>:

com·mu·ni·ca·tion *noun* \kə-ˈmyū-nə-ˈkā-shən\
: the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else
: a message that is given to someone : a letter, telephone call, etc.
communications : the ways of sending information to people by using technology

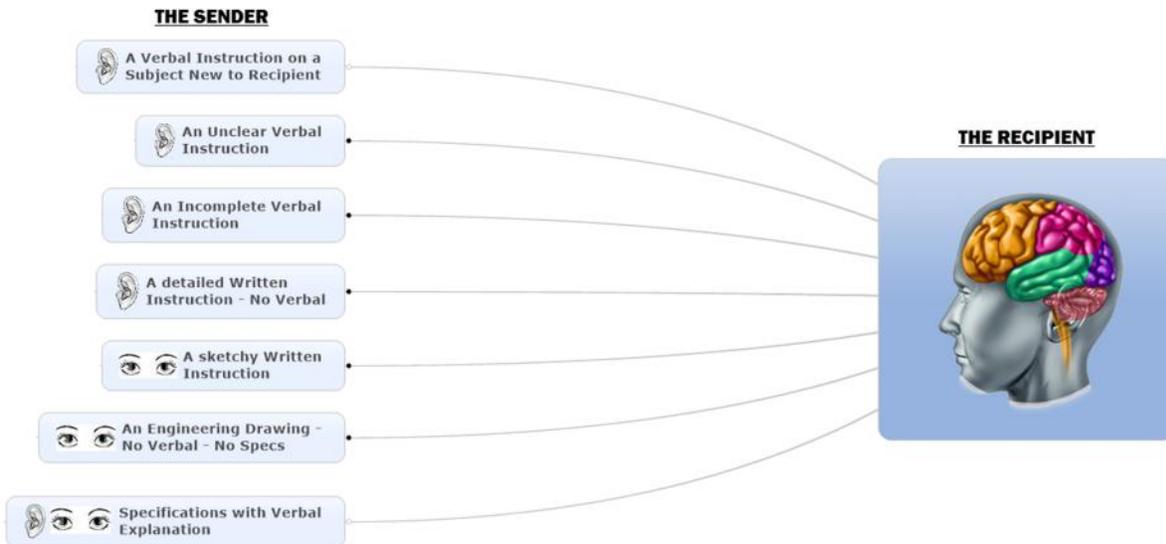
Nowhere does a dictionary extend the definition to include the adverbs “effective” or “successful”, or failing communication. This presents a major gap in the process of communication for the transmitter/sender and the recipient. Why?

For many reasons and they are all prevalent on a construction project, from cradle to grave. Just because our ears pickup noise vibrations or our eyes pass over words or see gestures does not assure that I see the same flower that you have described. You may see this:



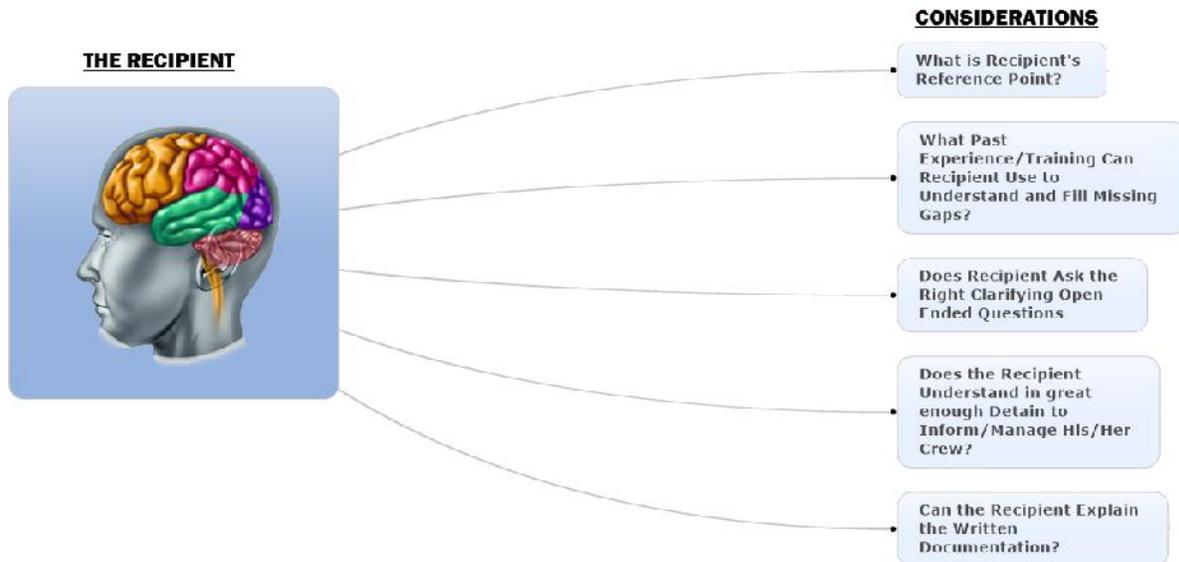
We have not successfully communicated. In the world of casual conversation this less than perfect communication probably causes no harm. In the world of construction project communication a simple color miscommunication can cause both time and money impact.

To open this topic into more detail let’s discuss the following brainstorming diagram:



How will the recipient understand these sample communications? Will the recipient ever get a clear and concise message? What processes will the recipient automatically apply to make sense of these messages. Will the conversation end here?

Let’s discuss some methods and factors that the recipient can apply based on his/her background. The following diagram opens to discussion some of these methods and factors:



Before jumping into discussion **on** about some of these considerations let's go back **into** to the underlying topic of a construction project. During the full life cycle of a major, especially a very technical project, it will involve many professions, many disciplines, and many levels of education, people with varied backgrounds and work/project type experience and work ethics. This means that communication must not only be timely, and succinct, but geared to the communicators and recipients involved. Believe it or not, this is a monumental task where failure is not acceptable.

The diagram certainly does not attempt to identify all or even most of the recipient's considerations that he/she may use. The communication will be received in context of what he/she has at their disposal to understand received information. It is at this point that the recipient's interpretation begins. Note, that thus far the communication is unidirectional, hopefully there will be clarifying iterative communication.

One fact we know, is that a recipient must use what they know to fill conversational gaps or comprehend the jargon; unless they are filled/clarified by further communications. Here is where the recipient's background differences, mentioned above, come heavily into play.

Is the Recipient Really Listening and Have Open Receptors

You as the communicator must determine if your chosen recipient is receptive. Let's try out several recipients and see if their body language informs you of their readiness.



Is this fellow ready to receive your communication? Seems like he is mentally somewhere else; don't see a notepad either. What must you do first, before you start speaking?

What about this guy, he may be a bit preoccupied with using his drill. It would probably be a good



idea to ask him to put the tool down before communicating.

If you just started communicating this would probably be a failed communication.



I don't think he is ready to take you seriously. "Who are you to be telling me what I need to do."



When the communication is well along the way or completed, this is what I would like to see.

At this point We will assume that the conversation has completed and the initial sign is that you communicated effectively. If you did not ask the recipient to at least paraphrase what he/she believed you communicated, are you really ready to end the conversation and believe it was a success?



Remember, it takes eye input and/or sound input plus the correct interpretation for communication to be successful.



How Does the Recipient's Reference Point Matter

The answer is, in many ways. First, as we stated earlier, communication is either written or communicated via voice, voice inflection and body gestures possibly in combination, depending on the means of conveyance. Each means of conveyance creates a unique set of recipient interpretations.

Non-face-to-face verbal communications, often from field office management to peers or subordinates, In this case the communication relies only upon voice, voice inflection, immediate recipient perception/interpretation, and following conversational iterations. We also deal with factors such as content overload, listening pauses, preoccupation and partial recall that will reduce the effectiveness of the conversation and its ultimate success. The communicator is usually busy and in a hurry to get onto other tasks, sometimes impatient.

What should the recipient do to lessen the negatives and receive/interpret succinct information? Here are a few suggestions:

- ✓ Stop what you are doing, both physically and mentally
- ✓ Take a deep, slow breath
- ✓ Try not to watch ongoing project tasks
- ✓ If by this time the communicator is on sentence two, ask him/her to repeat
- ✓ Allow the communicator to fully complete their sentence
- ✓ Take notes, not full notes, words, phrases, marks that will stimulate your memory
- ✓ Immediately after the conversation is complete, round out your notes
- ✓ If, after you have had time analyze/comprehend the notes, immediately (before action) call and clarify

- ✓ Don't begin anything new until you have complete clarity.
- ✓ Don't say "I don't have time for this procedure."

Face-to-face verbal communications, often from field management to multi-company peers or subordinates (crews and crew members), In this case the communication relies on a combination of voice, voice inflection, facial expressions, body_gesture's, immediate recipient perception/interpretation, and following conversational iterations. We also deal with factors such as the listener's preoccupation and partial recall that will reduce the effectiveness of the conversation and its ultimate success. The communicator often is a poor communicator, uses lots of construction jargon (dialect-specific) is usually a bit impatient if not immediately understood and in a hurry to get onto other tasks.

What should the recipient do to make sure his/her direction is 100% clear? If the recipient is a subordinate we can have additional considerations with which to deal. These can include conflicts in their relationship, resentments toward authority, pressures to get the work done and the like. If these issues exist they need to be resolved for successful communication.

What should the recipient do in this case to lessen the negatives and receive/interpret succinct information? Remember in this communication environment you have the advantage of reading and evaluating the communicator's body language. Also remember, the communicator can watch your body movements and gestures. Here are a few suggestions:

- ✓ Stop what you are doing, both physically and mentally
- ✓ Take a deep, slow breath
- ✓ Try not to watch ongoing project tasks
- ✓ Face the speaker and achieve eye contact (DON'T STARE)
- ✓ Try not to fiddle with objects
- ✓ In some way show on occasion that you are in the conversation and listening
- ✓ If by this time the communicator is on sentence two, ask him/her to repeat
- ✓ Allow the communicator to fully complete their sentence
- ✓ Take notes, not full notes, words, phrases, marks that will stimulate your memory (it's not wrong to ask the speaker to pause to allow time to write your note)
- ✓ If required to understand ask the speaker to rephrase the statement
- ✓ Immediately after the conversation is complete, round out your notes
- ✓ If, after you have had time analyze/comprehend the notes, immediately (before action) call and clarify
- ✓ Don't begin anything new until you have complete clarity.
- ✓ Don't say "I don't have time for this procedure."

Written communications, though no more important than verbal communications have the impression of being more precise and with more authority. In reality and legally this is not the case. There is, however a whole new set of consideration for the receiver of a written communique. Needed clarification is not immediate as it can be in verbal conversations.

- ✓ Read the document, then wait for the initial reaction to pass
- ✓ Read the document a second time and highlight/underline what stands out to you as salient and make side notes (marginalia).
- ✓ Especially note statements or words where you do not immediately grasp the meaning readily
- ✓ Either verbally or in writing (in a non-confrontational manner) seek clarification
- ✓ Re-read the document imposing the clarifications received
- ✓ Now is the time for action on your part
- ✓ At this point be sure that you understand the importance:
 - Is this contractual?
 - Is this a direction from a superior?
 - Do you see a problem with implementing the instruction?
 - Does this present a conflict?
 - Must you involve/instruct others?
 - And the like.

In Summary For The Recipient

Limit your own talking. You can't talk and listen at the same time. If you are thinking about what you are going to say next, then you are not listening.

Connect to the person with whom you are conversing. His or her problems and needs are important. You'll understand and retain them better if you keep his or her point of view.

When required ask clarification questions. If you don't understand something, or if you feel you may have missed a point, clear it up now before it embarrasses you later.

Don't interrupt or change the subject or paraphrase your understanding. A pause, even a long pause, doesn't always mean that the speaker has finished saying everything that he or she has to say. Intervening must be your judgment call.

Concentrate on what you are hearing by focusing on key/emphasized words or phrases. Focus your mind on what the speaker is saying. Practice shutting out outside distractions when listening. Maintaining direct eye contact helps with this.

Turn off your own worries and planned responses. Turning off and tuning in aren't always easy, but they are critical. Personal problems or worries not connected with the subject at hand form a kind of internal "static" that can blank out the real message that from the communicator.

Consider taking cryptic notes; dress them up after the conversation ends. If written communication, annotate your copy and confirm annotations. In most settings, taking notes is appropriate and will help you remember important points. Be selective. Trying to take notes on everything said can result in being left far behind or in retaining irrelevant information and totally missing segments of the conversation.

Listen for ideas, hard directives, possible references, not just words. You want to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces. Listen for key themes.

Use interjections to punctuate your listening. An occasional "Yes" or "I see" or nodding shows you are still with the speaker. However, wait until the speaker has finished his or her comment; don't overdo interjections; you can throw-off the communicators next thoughts.

Prepare in advance. Remarks and questions prepared in advance, when possible, free your mind for listening and pre-tune you into the subject.

React to ideas, not the person. Don't allow irritation to rise from things said, or from mannerisms. Try not to respond to these distractions. Base your response on principles, not personalities.

Don't argue mentally. Don't allow yourself to become annoyed or irritated with anything that is said. Try agreeing with points to see if you can understand the speaker's perspective better.

Don't jump to conclusions. Avoid making unwarranted assumptions about what is going to be said. Don't mentally try to complete the other person's sentences. Listen and learn.

In Summary For The Communicator

Your highest priority is to leave out any personal feelings and off-putting attitudes. This immediately triggers the recipient to be confrontational and close-minded. The needed facts and thoughts may have failed before it began.

- ✓ Think through what you need to communicate, before you initiate a conversation
- ✓ Mellow-out and take several deep breaths
- ✓ Ready the recipient with a few nice/complimentary words (everyday talk)
- ✓ Provide the background or foundation for the facts and direction to follow
- ✓ If the recipient is already familiar with the subject, help him/her bring the facts to the foreground (do this either with verbal or written communication)
- ✓ Talk up over any background noise
- ✓ Encourage return conversation to confirm that the recipient comprehended what you stated (TAKE THIS EXTRA TIME)
- ✓ The recipient has no hope of understanding if your communication is incomplete or above his/her head. (CLIMB INTO THE TRENCH)
- ✓ If history shows that the recipient forgets, flag your calendar to remind them. Don't wait until it is too late. You are the one responsible for this communication

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