Chapter 5

5 Communication in Public Relations

Objectives

At the end of this chapter students should be able to:

- Understand the goals of communication
- Have clear understanding of theories in communication
- Understand about basic communication process
- Have a better understanding about effective communication techniques

5.1   INTRODUCTION

People in organizations typically spend over 75% of their time in an interpersonal situation; thus it is no surprise to find that at the root of a large number of organizational problems is poor communication. Effective communication is an essential component of organizational success whether it is at interpersonal, intergroup, intragroup, organizational, or external levels.

We have established the idea that PR involves communication or relationships with publics who are important to the organization. To fully understand the public relations functions, it is essential to understand two primary related areas: communication and public opinions (as in chapter 3). Public relations practitioners do indeed function on behalf of other clients and organizations in a context of constantly changing opinions.

Practitioners are required to use communication strategies, internally or externally to maintain relationships on a continual basis with significant publics. Therefore, functioning effectively as a PR practitioner requires that a person fully understands the nature of public opinions and theories of communication.

3.1   DEFINITION OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is defined as the interchange of thoughts or opinions through shared symbols; example, language, words or phrases. Communication serves as the basis for control and coordination in organizations. It also provides information essential to effective completion of the organization's missions.

Communication establishes relationships and makes organizing possible. Every message has a purpose or objectives. The sender intends – whether consciously or unconsciously to accomplish something by communicating.

In an organizational context, messages typically have a definite objective: to motivate, to inform, to teach, to persuade, to entertain, or to inspire. This definite purpose is, in fact, one of the principal differences between casual conversation and managerial communication.
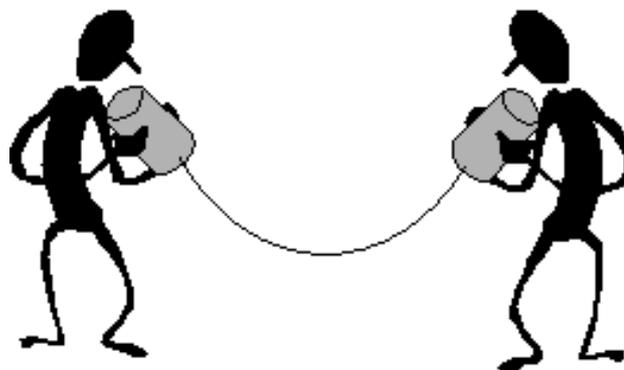
Effective communication in the organization centres on well-defined objectives that support the organization's goals and mission. Communication is the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.

5.2 GOALS OF COMMUNICATION

Basically, communication has its own goals and objectives. Most communication is aimed to achieve certain objectives. Typical goals of communication are:
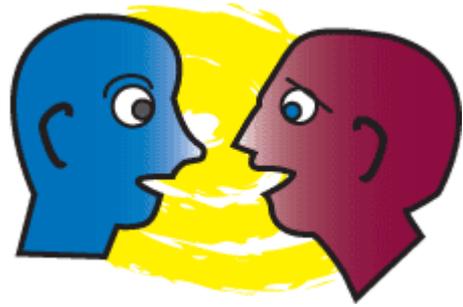
(a) *To inform* – Most of the communications goals of an organization is to inform or educate particular publics or audiences. For example, public relations activities or communication will be organised to inform employees about changes in the policies of the company.

(b) *To persuade* – A regular goal of public relations communicators is to persuade people to take certain actions. For example, a company's annual report that talks about the fund's long history of financial strength and security may provide a subtle persuasive appeal for potential investors.

(c) *To build mutual understanding* – Communication may also be used to gain mutual understanding. For example, a community group that meets with a local plant manager to express its concern about potential pollution of the neighbourhood is seeking understanding of the group's rationale and concern.

(d) *To motivate* – Motivation is used by the organization in order to motivate their employees. For example, the CEO of a banking sectors who outlines to her managers the institution's overriding objectives in the year ahead is communicating to motivate these key employees to action.
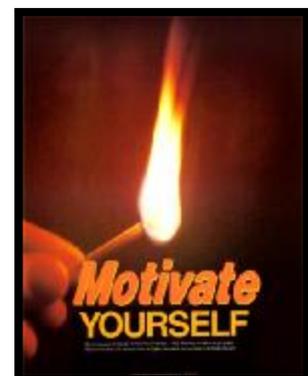
5.3   THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION

Many theories exist – from the traditional to the modern – about the most effective ways for a source to send a message through a medium to elicit a positive response. Most theories of communication have similar elements.
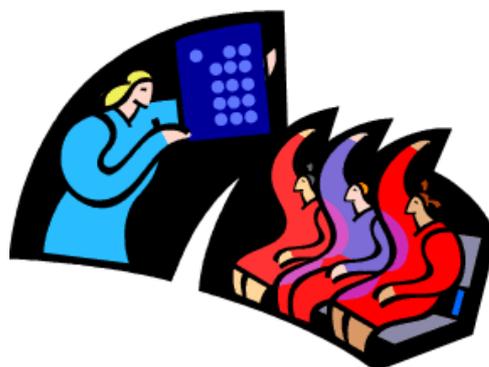
The theories of communication include:

(a) One early theory of communication, **the two-step flow theory** (as cited in "The practice of public relations" by Fraser P. Seitel 2004) state that an organization would beam a message first to the mass media, which would then deliver the message to a great mass of readers, listeners, and viewers for their response. This theory may have given the mass media too much credit. People today are influenced by a variety of factors, of which the media may be one but not necessarily the dominant one.

(b) The communication theories proposed by the late Pat Jackson have earned considerable respect in the public relations field. Jackson's public relations communications models, too, emphasized "systematic investigation – setting clear strategic goals and identifying key stakeholders". Jackson emphasized a five-step process:

1. **Building awareness** – First, build awareness through all the standard communication mechanisms, for example, using televisions and radios as a standard communication mechanism to promote a healthy lifestyle.

2. **Developing a latent readiness** – This is the stage at which people begin to form an opinion, based on such factors as knowledge, emotion, experience, intuition, memory and relationships. Example, people will avoid buying products or services if they believe that the products will not be beneficial to their health.


3. **Triggering event** – A triggering event is something – either natural or planned – that makes you want to change your behaviour. Example, staged functions, rallies, campaigns or appearances are examples of "planned" triggering events.

4. **Intermediate behaviour** – This is what Jackson called the "investigative" period, when an individual is determining how best to apply a desired behaviour.

5. **Behavioural change** – The last step is the adoption of new behaviour. Example, changing buying patterns, and many more.
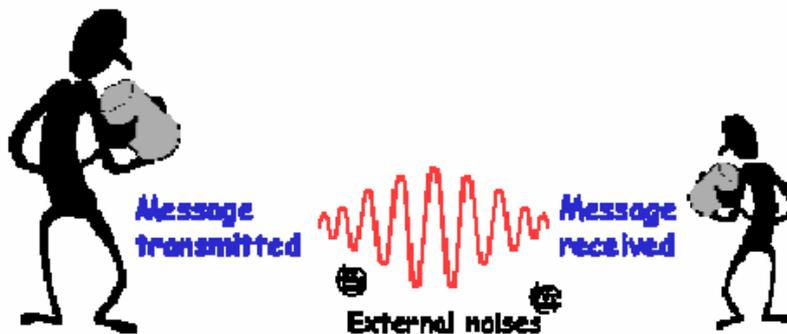
Figure 5.1: Communication process

Communication is something people do. It has no life of its own. There is no meaning in a message except what the people put into it. To understand the human communication process, one must understand how people relate to each other. Public relations and communication are not synonymous, but they do relate with each other. Much of the activity of the PR practitioner requires knowledge of the communication process.

- Communication is the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.

- The communication process is a system that involves an interrelated, interdependent group of elements working together as a whole to achieve a desired outcome or goal.

- Communication establishes relationships and makes organizing possible. Every message has a purpose or objective.

- The sender intends - whether consciously or unconsciously - to accomplish something by communicating.

- Effective communication in the organization centres on well-defined objectives that support the organization's goals and mission.

5.4   ELEMENTS OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

An understanding of human communication starts with a brief overview of basic models of human communication. The field of PR deals with a total communication process such as questioning, listening, communicating, analyzing, responding and evaluating. For example, in our circulatory and digestive system we can determine the elements involved, analyze how those elements affect one another, and thus determine the nature of the process as a whole. Applying this approach to the communication process, we find eight elements such as (1) a **source**/encoder of communication, which sends (2) a **message** (3) through a **channel** to (4) a **receiver**/decoder, which (5) responds via **feedback** with (6) possibilities of communication breakdowns (**Barrier**) in each stage of communication. However, these elements must be understood and analyzed in relation to (7) the **situation** or context, and (8) the **system** (such as relationship), which is created and maintained at some level by the communicators.
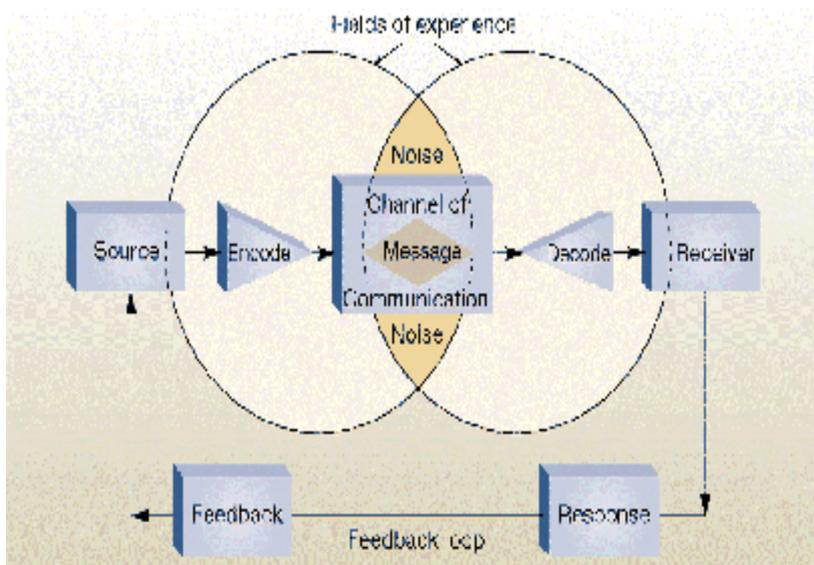
Figure 5.2: The communication process

(1) The Source/Encoder

- The sender begins the communication process by forming the ideas, intentions and feelings that will be transmitted. As the sender, you are required to filter out the details that are unimportant and focus your energy on the most relevant information. The source, or encoder, makes the decision to communicate. An example could be a person making a telephone call.

- The source also determines what the purpose of the message will be to inform, persuade, or entertain. First, the source must encode, or create, a message. That is, the information that the source wishes to convey must be put into a form that can be sent to the receiver. The source generates a message through his or her past experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Communication (both individual and organization) may communicate either verbally (words) or nonverbally (gestures, facial expressions, vocal tone). For example, a supervisor who has a message wants to communicate to a group of employees. His message may be that there will be a change in the vacation policy. Before the communication with his group of people, he must first decide how to start the conversation and what he needs to say. The process of choosing words to communicate his message is called *encoding*. The words chosen may not be the same as another person would make in the same situation.

(2) The Message

- The second element of the communication process is the message, or that information which is being communicated. The source encodes an idea and then determines whether or not to inform, persuade, or entertain. For example, the message refers to what is being communicated – the subject matter of the message (about salary, about new policies, about new products, and many more).

- After deciding what message to send, the source uses symbols to get the message across to others. These symbols stand for other things. For example, the hibiscus, the flag, are all symbols of Malaysia.

- But the most important symbols are words, which can represent objects, ideas, and feelings. These words permit us to share our thoughts with members of our species. To increase the likelihood of successful communication, the source must try to encode in a way that the receiver understands, so that the receiver can properly decode (interpret) the message.

(3) Channel

- Channels are the means (that is, pathways or devices) by which messages are communicated. Channels may be described and analyzed in two different ways. The first involves the form in which messages are sent to receivers.

- Forms include both verbal and nonverbal channels of communication. We use our five senses to receive messages from others. We may hear a call-in talk show on the radio, watch a soccer match on television, smell fresh bread baking as we drive past the local bakery, taste the flavours in a fresh cappuccino, or hug a friend to console him when his cat died.

- Channels may also be described according to the manner of presentation employed in communication. The source may speak face-to-face with the receiver, use a public address system to talk with a hundred listeners, or talk over radio or television to million of receivers. Each of these examples would demand different manners of presentation.

- Depending on the situation, the source would concentrate on verbal and/or nonverbal channels of communication. If the speaker were on radio, physical appearance would not matter, but if he or she were performing on a cable network program or before a live audience, personal appearance could easily influence the reception of the message. For example, when we go to watch a circus, we expect the clowns to have painted faces and appropriate costumes. If they were dressed in regular street clothes, their performance would not be as effective. Whatever channels of communication are used, the source must learn to adapt the message to make use of the most appropriate channels available for the situation.

(4) Decoder/Receiver

- The person (or persons) who attend to the source's message is the receiver.

- The act of interpreting messages is called *decoding*. Receivers decode messages based on past experiences, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings – or as individual perceptions.

- The receiver is the intended recipient of a message. Receivers like sources, may be individuals or groups of people. In PR, which is a receiver oriented profession, much of the practitioner's time is spent on selecting or targeting certain publics. Universities for example, have many key publics. Students and faculty come to mind first, but the list also includes parents, prospective students, and residents of the community where the university is located and so on.

COSMOPOINT

- People receive messages through all their senses, but most often they decode messages by listening or seeing. People first have a physiological reception of stimuli (a noise causes sound waves to hit our eardrum or a movement catches our eye).

- People then pay attention to both the verbal and nonverbal stimuli and reduce all the stimuli bombarding them to one or two which they can cope more easily. Next, they will try to understand the stimuli and interpret them into messages (they decide that the noise is a telephone bell or that the movement is a friend waving to them across campus). Finally, they will store this information for later use so that next time they will be able to respond to the stimuli more quickly.

> It is important to remember that receivers make immediate decisions about what they will respond to in a given situation and then encode a response. The response may be silent, noisy, or somewhere in between, depending upon the situation and the existence of any barriers to communication.

(5) Feedback

- Another element in the communication process is feedback. Each party in an interaction continuously sends messages back to the other. This return process is called *feedback.*

- Feedback tells the source how the receiver has interpreted each message. For example, if at the airport you ask your departing friend about his itinerary, and he replies that he did not pack one, you know your message has not been understood. This kind of feedback, which conveys lack of understanding, is known as negative feedback. Positive feedback, on the other hand, indicates that the receiver has understood the source's message. It does not

necessarily mean that he or she agrees with the source, just that the message was interpreted accurately.

- Feedback can also be ambiguous, not clearly positive or negative. "I see" and "mm-hmm" can be examples of ambiguous feedback. The effective communicator is always sensitive to feedback and constantly modifies his or her messages as a result of the feedback received. After a discreet pause, for example, you might ask your friend not about his "itinerary" but about the cities he plans to visit.
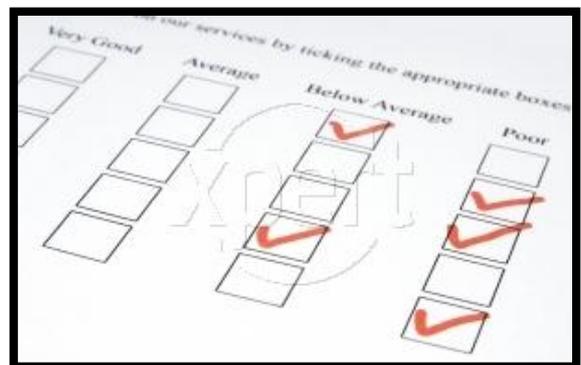
(6) Barriers

- Barriers in the communication process sometimes referred to as noise are any factors which interfere with effective communication. Barriers to the communication process includes attitudes, differences in language, physical surroundings, closed-mindedness, and many more physical and semantic differences between the senders and the receivers.

(7) Context or situation

- Communication, be it one-on-one or public, does not happen in a vacuum. Communication is affected by and influenced by the nature of the context or situation in which the communicators function.


Listener   Talker

5.5 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

- **Listen Actively**
  - Be attentive - concentrate on what is being said.
  - Be impartial – do not form an opinion, just listen.
  - Reflect back - restating what has been said helps the speaker know that you understand.
  - Summarize - pull together the important messages so that you and the speaker recognize what was important during the conversation.

- **Nonverbal Message**
  - Posture - let your body show that you are interested by sitting up and leaning toward the speaker.
  - Equal positioning - if the speaker is standing, you stand. If the speaker is sitting, you sit as well.
  - Facial expression - remember that feelings are reflected in facial expressions.
  - Gestures - your body language reveals a lot about how you interpret a message, so be aware of when you send signals that might cause the speaker to believe that you are angry, in a hurry, bored, etc.

- **Express Thoughts and Feelings**
  - Be open and honest - collaboration between parents and professionals begins with the understanding that you trust each other with all information.
  - Speak clearly – do not mumble and do not talk too quietly. If you do not know the word for something, describe what you mean so that you and the speaker can have a shared understanding of your concern or question.

- **Communicate Without Being Adversarial**
  - Express concerns non-judgmentally - talk about your questions or concerns without blaming other people. For example, you might be angry that your child is not receiving enough speech therapy. Rather than talk about the

speech therapist not doing his/her job, discuss your idea of how often your child should receive this service.

   o Use "I" messages. Rather than say, "You did not explain that very well," say, "I did not understand what you just said. Please explain it again."

5.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION
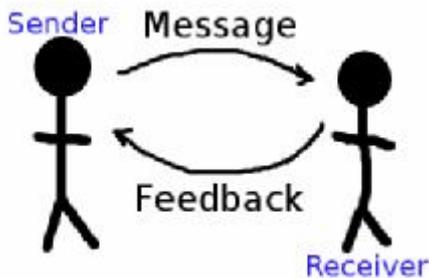
Two-way communication is a form of transmission in which both parties involved transmit information. Effective communication requires both sender and receiver to have basic communication skills. Sender or source must be able to express messages in very acceptable forms and avoiding any unnecessary barriers.

- Effective feedback is absolutely essential to organisational effectiveness; people must know where they are and where to go next in terms of expectations and goals - yours, their own, and the organization.

- Feedback taps basic human needs - to improve, to compete, to be accurate; people want to be competent. Feedback can be reinforcing; if given properly, feedback is almost always appreciated and motivates people to improve.

- Two-way communication enables a company to provide assessment to the PR programme being implemented. This assessment can be done through interviews, distributing questionnaires and many more.

5.7 TECHNIQUES TO FOSTER COMMUNICATION – BOTH VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL

- *Nod your head* – By nodding your head, you will acknowledge information being transferred from the speaker.

- *Keep an open body position* – if the person speaking is standing, you should stand too, and vice versa

- *Maintain eye contact* – you should maintain good eye contact to ensure effective communication flow takes place.

- *Repeat the last word or two of the prior speaker*

- *Make encouraging statements*

- *Repeat a sentence or part of one*

5.8   SUMMARY

Communication refers to interchange of thoughts or opinions through shared symbols, examples, language, words or phrases. PR involves communication or relationships with publics, so it is important for PR practitioners to have necessary communication skills to deal with publics.

Communication establishes relationships and makes organizing possible. Every message in communication has its own purpose and objectives. The senders whether they consciously or not use communication to accomplish or to deliver something by communicating. The aims of message delivered are to motivate, to inform, to teach, to persuade, to entertain, or to inspire. Communication is the process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.

In the business world, communication is mainly made for certain reasons. Goals of communication are to inform, for example to inform publics about their new products. Next, to persuade, that is to persuade people to change their behaviour or to take certain actions. Besides, the goal of communication is also to build mutual understanding for example a community group that meets with a local plant manager to express its concern about potential pollution of the neighbourhood. Lastly the goal is to motivate, e.g. management use communication to motivate their employees to work extra hours.

There are several early theories about communication namely the two-step flow theory where the organization would beam a message first to the mass media, which would then deliver the message to the great mass of readers, listeners, and viewers for their response. The second theory is the concentric theory, which emphasizes the five step process: building awareness, developing latent readiness, triggering event, intermediate behaviour and behavioural change.

There are several elements of the communication process. They are: the source/encoder, the message, the channel of communication, decoder/receiver, feedback, barriers, and context or situation.

In order for organizations to effectively communicate with its publics, there are certain effective communication techniques namely: listen actively, using nonverbal message, express thoughts and feelings and communicate without being adversarial.

5.9   EXERCISE

Section A: Short answer questions.

1. What is communication?

2. Why do you think communication is important in public relations?

3. People communicate between one another for specific goals and reasons. List some of the goals of communication?

4. Briefly explain the concentric-circle theory?

5. Briefly explain the two-steps flow theory?

6. What are the elements of communication process?

7. List different kinds of techniques to foster communication?

Section B: Essay questions.

1. In your own words, explain how communication takes place between one person and another. Include all elements in the communication process. Also provide examples of the elements.

2. In groups of two, try to create a situation, eg. A company handling a customer's enquiries over the phone.   Try to create a dialogue for the situation and role play in front of the class.