UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

Florida Cooperative Extension Service

Communication Process and Leadership[1]

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Communication is central to all human social behavior. Humans cannot socially interact unless they communicate through shared symbols. Through sharing common symbols, people can communicate information, ideas, and emotions.[1]

Individuals use symbols -- words, gestures, pictures -- to transmit messages -- information, ideas, emotions -- to others. When people give similar meanings to the symbols, they communicate. Similar meanings arise from a common social and cultural background. The members of a community service club have a common social and cultural background. The service club members have shared many experiences. The meanings which they assign to word, gesture, and picture symbols are likely to be quite similar.

Communication is one of the essential elements of leadership. Without communication, there is no leadership. It is possible, however, to communicate without leading. If a member of a women's club suggests that the club initiate a beautification project for the community park, it is possible that the club will not do so, even though the other members of the women's club understand the communication. A beautification project for the community park would never happen, however, without communication of some kind.

In leadership roles, it is important that you communicate what you desire to communicate. The basic concern of this publication is the relationship between communication and leadership.

This publication will first focus on the process of communication to give you an idea how the communication act takes place. The second part will emphasize the sending of messages to individuals and groups through a third party, often the leader of the group. In the third part, we will consider some of the factors which influence the acceptance of communications. The fourth part will look at different communication patterns. Finally, we will summarize and offer some suggestions for leaders.

DEFINITION OF COMMUNICATION

Communication covers a wide topic area. Any definition of a topic as broad as communication would be too general, too complex, or too fragmented to be of much use to a community leader. We can explain various aspects of communication with definitions, but they would not be unified. One way to define communication is to explain the process of communication.

Applying the term process to communication means that it is an ongoing event. In our social interaction with others, we are communicating. Communication, therefore, is the process whereby we attempt to transmit our thoughts, ideas, wishes, or emotions to others.
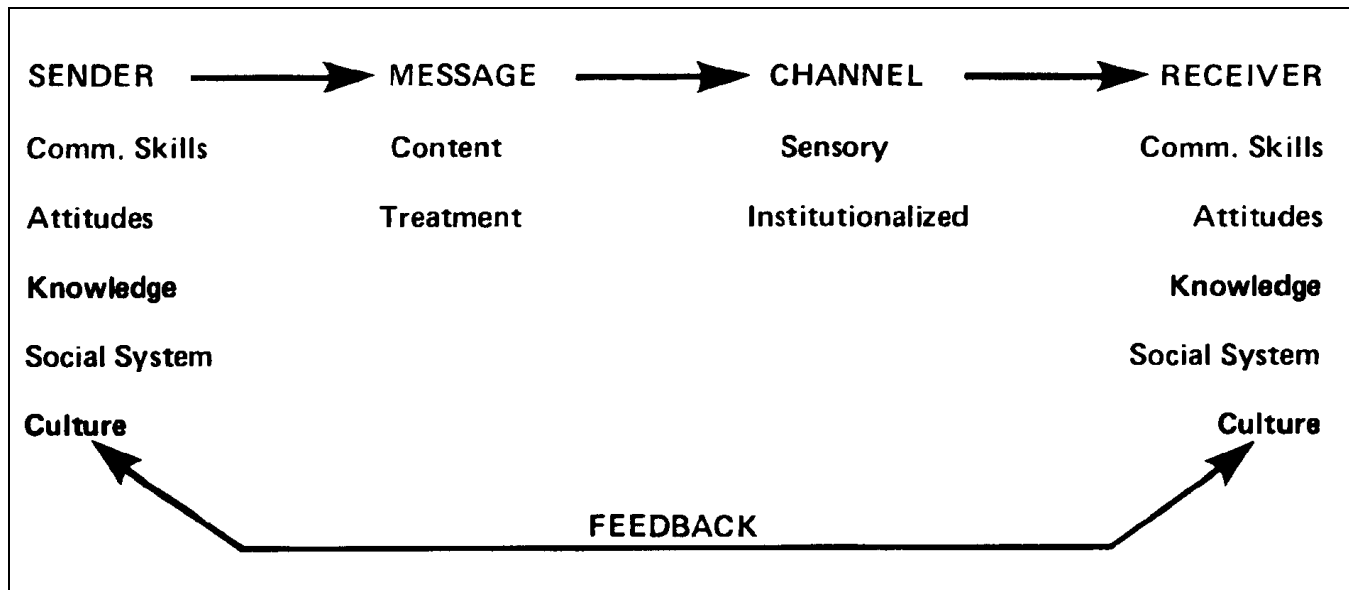
Figure 1. Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (SCMR) Model of Communication.

For our purpose, communication involves only the information, thoughts, ideas, etc., that we want to transmit to a specific audience. The definition of communication does not include observed behavior unless the observed behavior is intended to help transmit the message. For instance, there is no communication between a leader and two group members having a conversation on the other side of the room, even if the leader is observing their behavior. The two group members do not intend their conversation to transmit any messages to the leader. Nor is the leader intending to transmit any messages to the two members through his observation. However, the leader can use gestures to help transmit messages to a specific audience as a part of the communication process.

The goal of communication is the acceptance of the sender's message by the receiver. If the receiver understands the meaning of a message which asks for action, but fails to act, the goal of communications is not achieved. But if the receiver does respond to the message by taking the appropriate action, the goal of the communication has been achieved.

COMMUNICATION PROCESS MODEL -- SMCR

There are many communication models which serve a variety of purposes. They range from single event analyses which can be used to instruct beginners, to complex models which are usually understood only by specialists in the field of communication. We have chosen the **Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver** (**SMCR**) Model for this publication. The SMCR model (Figure 1) is useful for examining a single communicative event; that is, it can isolate one event out of the ongoing communication process and illustrate the actions which take place.[2]

Sender

The **sender** (or source) in the SMCR model is the transmitter of the message. There are five factors which influence the sender in any communication he transmits:

1. Communication skills
2. Attitudes
3. Knowledge
4. Position in the social system
5. Culture

These five factors also influence the receiver and will only be summarized here.

There are five verbal **communication skills** which determine our ability to transmit and receive messages. Two are sending skills: speaking and writing. Two are receiving skills: listening and reading. The fifth is important to both sending and receiving: thought or reasoning. The extent of the development of these skills helps determine our ability to communicate verbally.

The effectiveness of our communication is also determined by our ability to make use of nonverbal communications skills. A stern look of disapproval from the group leader readily communicates to the group member receiving the look that something he said or did was not well taken.

Attitudes, the second factor influencing the sender and receiver, are hard to define. For our purpose we will say that an attitude is a generalized tendency to feel one way or another about something. For instance, you may have a favorable or an unfavorable attitude toward voluntary groups working to solve community problems. If your attitude on this matter is favorable, you may, however, feel that certain problems could be better handled by the city council.

Attitudes influence our communication in three ways. Attitudes toward *ourselves* determine how we conduct ourselves when we transmit messages to others. If we have a favorable self-attitude, the receivers will note our self-confidence. If we have an unfavorable self-attitude, the receiver will observe our uneasiness. However, if our favorable self-attitude is too strong, we tend to become brash and overbearing, and our communication loses much of its effect with the receiver.

Attitude toward *subject matter* affects our communication by predetermining the way we word our messages about certain subjects. An example would be a community leader with a favorable attitude toward bringing industry into the local area. He is likely to talk about only the good that industry could achieve. He may deliberately neglect to mention the difficulties encountered in trying to recruit new industry or any possible undesirable effects that might result.

Attitude toward the *receiver* or the receiver's attitude toward the sender is the third attitude item which influences our communication. Our messages are likely to be very different when communicating the same content to someone we like and someone we dislike. We also structure our messages differently when talking to someone in a higher position than ours, in the same position or in a lower position, regardless of whether we like them or not.

Knowledge level has a bearing on our ability to communicate effectively about a subject. A businessman might feel ill at ease trying to talk with a farmer about hogs, cattle, corn, or beans. The farmer would probably not feel qualified to talk about city slums, urban traffic problems, or city government. However, they may both feel quite comfortable discussing politics.

The **position** of the sender and the receiver in their respective **social systems** also affects the nature of the communicative act. Each one of us occupies a position in one or more social systems, such as our family, work groups, church, community, or the organizations to which we belong. We perceive those with whom we communicate as occupying a similar, higher, or lower position in their respective social systems. (This ties in with the previous sections on attitudes toward the receiver or sender.)

Our **culture** is the fifth influence determining our communication effectiveness. Communication is more effective between persons with similar cultural backgrounds. Culture is relatively independent of social position in many cases. For instance, a voluntary association leader could probably communicate better with the people in his own group, because of their similar cultural background, than he could with a leader in the same organization located in a different geographic area.

Message

In the SMCR model, the **message** is what the sender attempts to transmit to his specified receivers. Every message has at least two major aspects (Figure 2): content and treatment.[3]
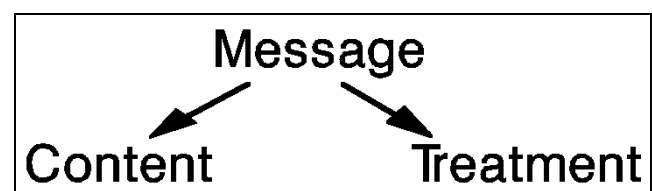

Figure 2. Two major aspects of a message.

The **content** of the message includes the assertions, arguments, appeals, and themes which the sender transmits to the receivers. For instance, community leaders may wish to send a message to community organizations appealing for financial support for a new swimming pool. The context of the message may include the results of a survey showing the need for a new swimming pool, the proposed plan for the new pool, the costs involved, and the appeal for financial support.

The **treatment** of the message is the arrangement or ordering of the content by the sender. In the
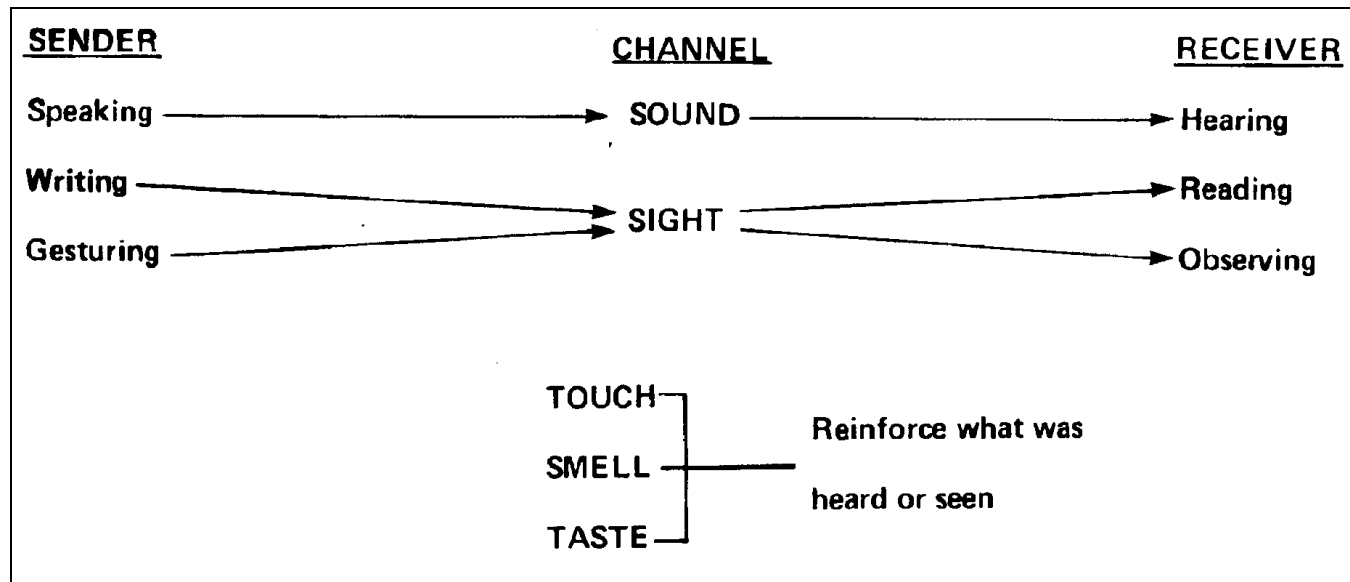
Figure 3. Sensory Channels, based on the five senses.

above example, the community leaders can arrange the content in many ways. The receiver is likely to be more receptive to the message, however, if the sender talks about the survey illustrating the needs prior to talking about the costs and making the appeal for financial support.

The selection of content and the treatment of the message depend upon our communication skills, attitudes, knowledge level, our position in social systems, and our culture. The selection of content and the treatment of the message we use also depend upon our audience and their communication skills, knowledge, attitudes, social position, and culture. A doctor, for example, would probably select different content and treat the message differently when talking about the same subject to two different audiences, e.g., his fellow doctors and a group of community leaders.

Channel

Social scientists recognize two types of channels: (1) **sensory channels** based on the five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, (Figure 3) and (2) **institutionalized means** such as face-to-face conversation, printed materials, and the electronic media (Figure 4).[4]

We use the institutionalized means to transmit most of our messages. Each institutionalized medium requires one or more of the sensory channels to carry the message from the sender to the receiver. For

instance, when we use face-to-face conversation (an institutionalized medium) we make use of sight (gestures, expressions), sound (voice, other noises), and possibly touch, smell, or taste.

Social scientists have generally found that the receiver's attention is more likely to be gained if the sender uses a combination of institutionalized means using two or more sensory channels. Suppose, for example, someone tells your group that the quality of education in your community is not as good as the public is led to believe. If your group can discuss the problems face-to-face with school administrators during visits to the school (sight and sound) as well as hear about them through institutionalized means, such as television and newspapers, they are more likely to pay attention to the message.

When applying the multi-channel concept to real situations, you need to consider the three basic institutionalized means and a minimum of two of the sensory channels, specifically sight and sound.

Face-to-face conversation has the greatest potential for getting the receiver's attention. It should be the primary institutionalized means used by leaders in sending messages to their group members. However, leaders should supplement face-to-face conversation with other institutionalized means and sensory channels in their continuing effort to gain the attention of their group members.
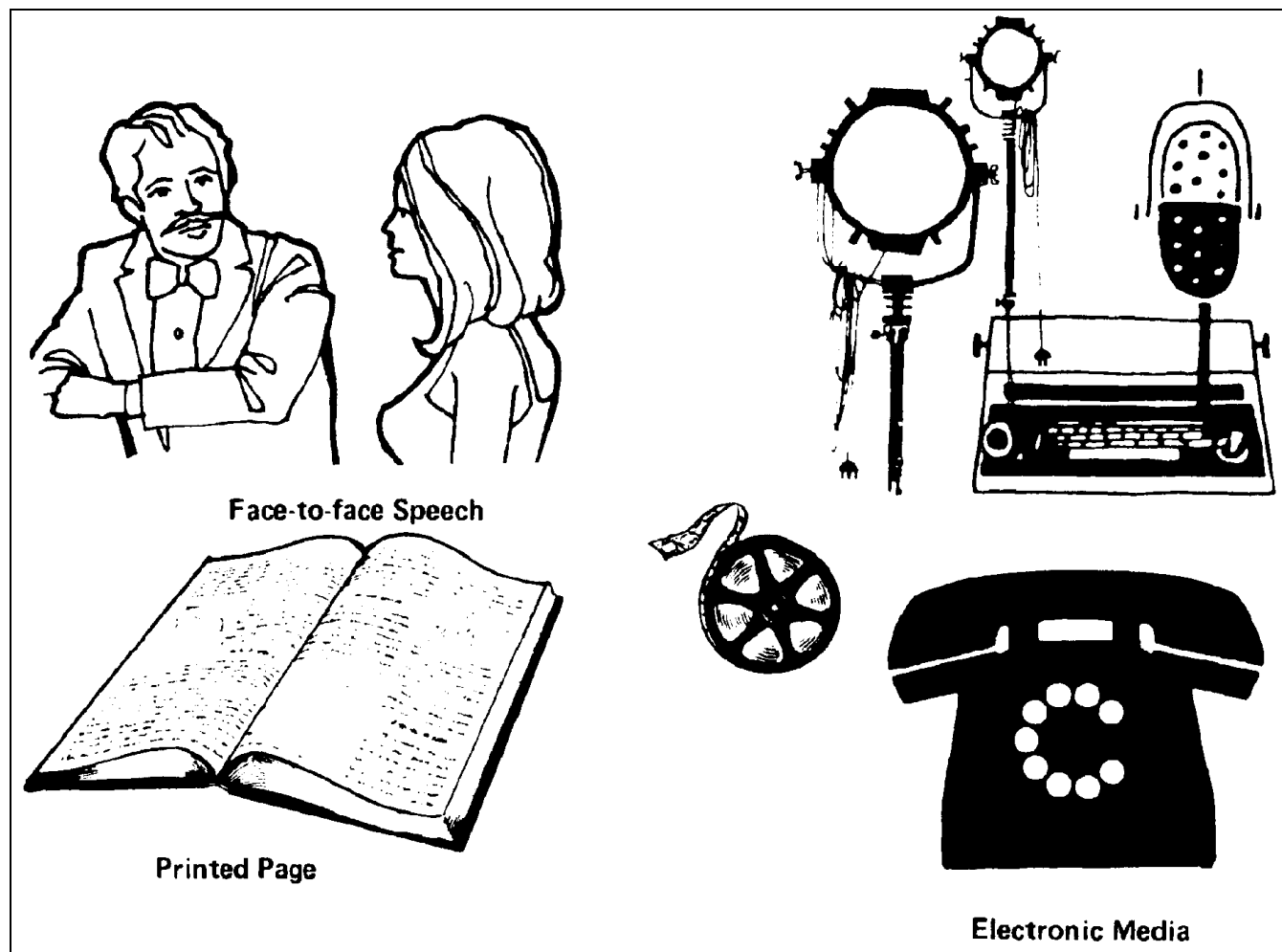
Figure 4. Institutionalized Means which make use of Sensory Channels.

Receivers

The receiver in the SMCR model must attend to, interpret, and respond to the transmitted message. The goal of communication is reached when the receiver accepts the sender's message. Attention and comprehension are the means the receiver uses to attain the goal of acceptance of the message (Figure 5).

Attention is the process by which the receiver tunes in on a message and listens to it, watches it, or reads it. The sender must consider his receiver and treat the message in such a way that the receiver's attention is more easily gained and retained.

Comprehension implies understanding of the message by the receiver. Here again, the sender must consider his intended receiver and use message content and treatment that will enable the receiver to understand the message.

Once the receiver has attended to the message and comprehended or understood the content, his next task is to **accept** the message on at least one of three levels: the *cognitive*, that is, the receiver accepts the message content as true; the *affective*, the receiver believes that the message is not only true but good; *overt action*, where the receiver believes the message is true, believes it is good, takes the appropriate action.[5]

The sender can do much in deciding on his content and treatment of the message to gain the receiver's attention and comprehension. However, he has little control over the receiver's acceptance of the message. One consideration required at this point is to note that receivers are more inclined to accept message contents which agree with their previous attitudes. The sender has a less difficult task if his message agrees with the receiver's attitudes. If the receiver disagrees with the sender's message, acceptance is less likely.
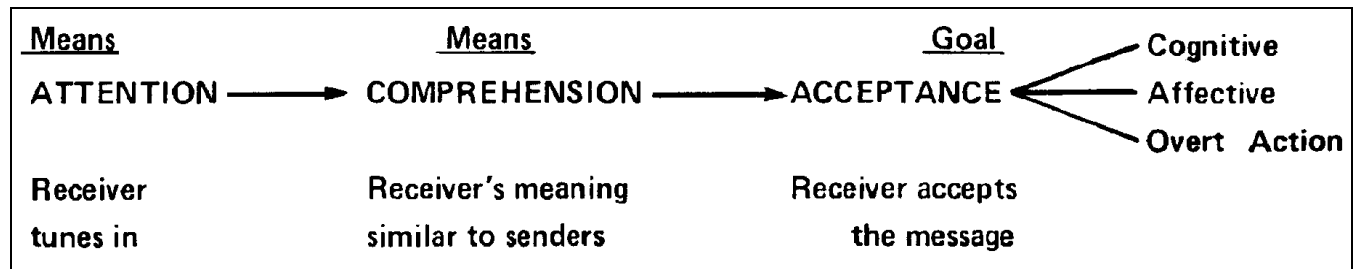
Means	Means	Goal	
ATTENTION ———▶	COMPREHENSION ———▶	ACCEPTANCE ◀——	Cognitive / Affective / Overt Action
Receiver tunes in	Receiver's meaning similar to senders	Receiver accepts the message	

Figure 5.

Feedback

Feedback is the sender's way of determining the effectiveness of his message. During feedback the direction of the communication process is reversed. When providing feedback, the original receiver goes through the same process as did the original sender and the same factors influence him as they did the sender.

The receiver may use the same channel for feedback as the sender used for the original message; this is usually the case in face-to-face conversation. Or the receiver may take a different channel, as might be the case when you as a leader transmit a message to your group requesting action on a matter and a group acts or does not act in the way you asked. The group's actions have then become the feedback. Another example might be the increased sales of a product due to radio and television advertising. The purchase of the product by the public provides feedback to the manufacturer on the effectiveness of the communicated message.

In face-to-face conversation feedback is more easily perceived. The sender can tell if the receivers are paying attention when he speaks to them. If a receiver falls asleep or looks at other things in the surrounding environment, the sender realizes that he does not have the receiver's attention.

If the sender sees furrowed brows or questioning facial expressions in his receivers, he knows that they did not comprehend his message. However, the overt action taken by the receiver is the feedback that the sender uses to determine the amount of influence he has had with the receiver.

Feedback measures influence. We know that democratic leadership involves influencing others. When a group has been successful in raising money for a community project, they can rightfully feel that they were influential. If the group had failed in their effort to raise the money, one of the reasons could be that they were not influential in the community. If your group takes the action you want them to take, you have been influential; if it does not, then you were not influential.

Feedback provides a method of eliminating miscommunication. It is most effective in face-to-face conversation where feedback is instantaneous. If a group leader asks one of the members for some ideas on projects for the next year and the member suggests having travel films, the leader knows immediately that miscommunication has occurred. The group member suggested program ideas and not project ideas. The feedback would be effective if the leader were to immediately clarify the difference between programs and projects. Had the situation not been face-to-face, the group member might still be thinking of travel films for next year's project.

THE TWO-STEP FLOW OF COMMUNICATION

We will now look at another communication process, the two-step flow. This process occurs when messages are relayed through a third person from the sender to the receiver.[6]

As shown in Figure 6, the sender, A, selects messages from the available information he wishes to transmit to C, the receiver. Both the sender and the receiver may be either individuals or groups.

For instance, A might be the national or state president of a voluntary association which has local clubs in numerous communities. In achieving the goals of the association, the national or state president will likely need to communicate to the members, C, in the different local clubs.

Since the national or state president is unlikely to communicate directly with each individual member of the association, we need a third person, B, to relay the messages from the sender to the receiver. B is
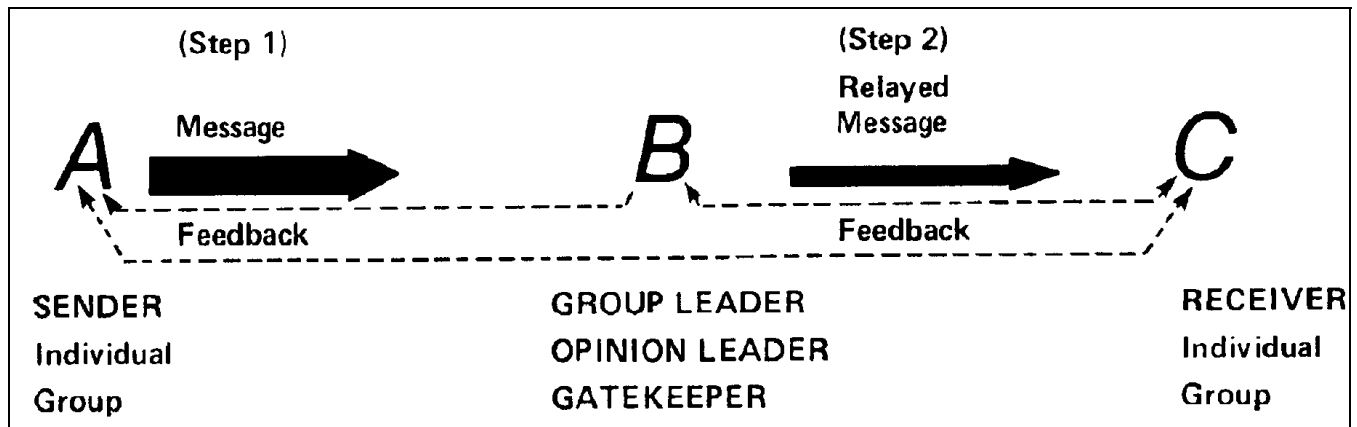
Figure 6.

often referred to as the opinion leader, the group leader, or the gatekeeper. The local group leader (possibly the president or secretary of the local club) selects information from A's messages and transmits it on to C, the receivers or local club members. Thus, we have two-step flow; from A to B and from B to C. The two-step flow can work just as well in the opposite direction.

Key to Success. B is the key to success of the two-step flow. We know that no two people have exactly the same meaning for a message. It is up to B, however, to insure that A's message, when relayed to C, is as close as possible to what A actually said. Otherwise, C will not comprehend the message in the way that A wanted. For this reason, A should require feedback from B to see if B understood correctly, and B should require feedback from C to see if C understood correctly what was relayed to him. If possible, A should try, from time to time, to get direct feedback from C to see if B is relaying the messages properly.

Your group can practice communication improvement by setting up a two-step situation. Have one member be A and transmit a message to another member who is B. The message should be written down as a check on accuracy. B will then transmit the message to C who is played by a third group member. Both B and C provide feedback to A who determines how accurately the message was relayed.

Through practice sessions such as these, your group members can develop the habit of providing feedback to indicate the proximity of meanings and also develop skills in relaying messages. Both feedback and message relay are important to successful group communication.

INFLUENTIAL COMMUNICATION FACTORS

Three things about the sender of a message affect the receptability of his message by the receiver.[7] They are:

- credibility
- objectivity
- expertness

These three aspects of the sender are inter-related in their effect on the receiver. The receiver, in order to believe the message or respond in the way the sender wants him to, must perceive the sender as credible, objective, and expert in the area. If your service club wanted to study community juvenile delinquency and its cure, whom would you bring in as guest speakers?

The police chief, county sheriff, probation officer, or welfare director, would be credible sources on the extent of delinquency in your area. A person whose windows were broken several times by vandals might well be credible, but he is not likely to be objective, nor will he be an expert.

When inviting a speaker who could give advice on cures for delinquency, a probation officer or someone from the state training school would be most likely perceived as credible, objective, and expert. However, if the probation officer or training school staff member claimed that their methods for curing delinquency were best, they would lose their objectivity. If the receivers perceived this, the messages would not be accepted as easily as they would if the sender were objective.
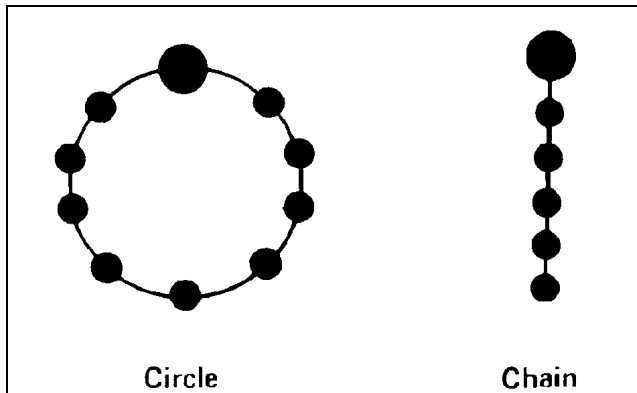
Figure 7. Communication Patterns: A) Circle, B) Chain

Figure 8. Communication Patterns: A) Y, B) Wheel.

If the sender tells us what we want to hear, he will have little difficulty getting us to accept the message. However, many times the sender has to tell us something we do not want to hear. When this happens, he must be credible (someone the audience will perceive as trustworthy), objective (one who looks at all sides of the problem before making an impartial decision), an expert (one who is qualified to comment on the problem in question).

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

The diagrams show the communication patterns most frequently used. The large dot represents the sender or the leader, while the smaller dots indicate the receivers or other group members.

Each of the four patterns presents one basic and serious communications problem. That is, no group member communicates directly with every other group member. Three of the patterns do not allow each member to communicate directly with the leader.

In the **circle** (Figure 7a), the group member communicates only with the persons next to him. A message from the leader is likely to be changed considerably by the time it completes the circle and gets back to him.

With the **chain** (Figure 7b), we have the same problem as in the circle. The last man may get a different message than that which the leader transmitted. An even worse problem here is that the sender gets no feedback; he doesn't know how much the message is distorted.

The "**Y**" (Figure 8a) is a further complication of the chain. It has all the communication problems of
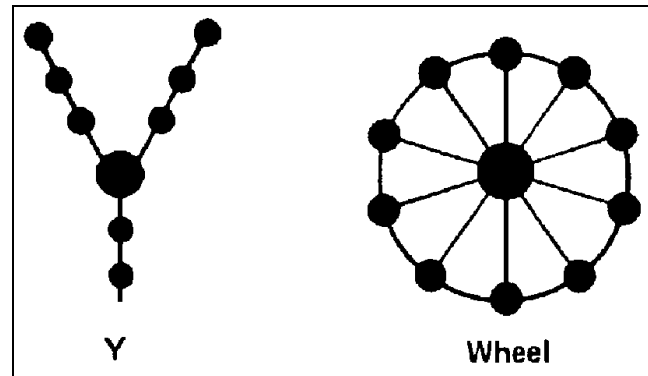
the circle and the chain and the additional one of having three separate groups who can communicate only through the leader.

The **wheel** (Figure 8b) is the best of the four. The leader can communicate directly with each group member. However, all of the group members cannot communicate with each other. This pattern can be used in all groups that are small enough to allow direct communication between the leader and each member. Larger groups are almost forced to use the other patterns or modifications of them.

If your group cannot use the wheel pattern, your best insurance against message distortion is prompt feedback. Remember, the leaders are responsible for implementing and utilizing feedback.

Leaders should note, however, that as groups grow in numerical size, feedback becomes more formalized. Although the goal of our communication is to get the receiver to take some appropriate action, we need to have feedback from group members in ways other than overt action. We may, for instance, want to insure that the meaning was understood or get an opinion from the receiver on the message content without him taking any overt action at the present time.

Several methods can be used to get such feedback. Among the methods are evaluation sheets, verbal reports from audience, listening teams, question cards, or reports and questions from individual members.

If a group is small enough that each member can communicate with every other member, they have an ideal situation. Communication will be very informal and the sender's goal of acceptance of the transmitted message is more likely to be achieved. This **modified**

wheel pattern diagrams such a communicative process (Figure 9).

SUMMARY

Communication is one of the essential elements of leadership. Through the communication process, leaders attempt to influence the behavior of others toward goals. The **Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver** model presented in this publication is one framework which leaders can use to help gain a better understanding of the communication process.

The **sender** and the **receiver** of a message are both affected by five important factors: communication skills; attitudes; knowledge level; social position; and culture.

The **message** is what the sender attempts to transmit to the receiver. Every message has at least two major aspects: content and treatment.

There are two types of **channels**. The sensory channels are the five senses of sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste. The institutionalized channels of communication include face-to-face conversation, printed words, and the electronic media. A combination of channels, sensory and institutionalized, is generally more effective on the receiver's attention to the message.

The **receiver** plays the final role in the communication process. The receiver determines the net effect of the message by accepting or not accepting the message.

Feedback helps the sender determine the proximity of his and the receiver's meaning for the message. It also helps to prevent miscommunication and, most important, measures the amount of influence the sender had on the receiver.

The **two-step flow of communication** is helpful in analyzing communication events when messages are relayed through third persons from the sender to the receiver. The third persons are often referred to as opinion leaders, group leaders, or gatekeepers. Since the third persons can permit some messages to come to the attention of the group while blocking out others, it is essential that they be group-oriented leaders rather than self-oriented.

In order to achieve maximum effectiveness with the receiver, the sender of the message must be
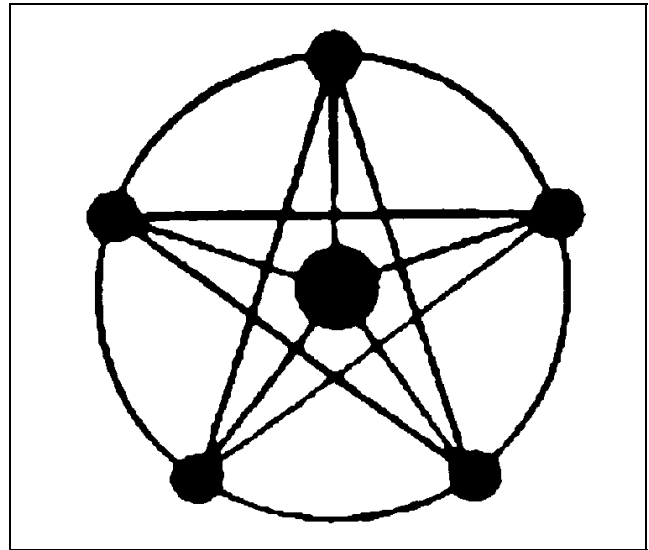

Figure 9. Communication Pattern: Modified Wheel.

perceived as *credible*, *objective* and *expert*.

If one or more of these factors is absent, the receiver is less likely to attend to the message and take the appropriate action. This is an even greater problem when the sender transmits a message the receiver does not like nor care to hear.

In smaller groups, all members can communicate with each other and the leader. Larger groups cannot do this but they can improve their communication by judicious use of feedback. Feedback can help reduce miscommunication in large groups.

SUGGESTIONS FOR LEADERS

The following hints should help leaders improve their interpersonal communication.

1. In selecting the content and determining the treatment for the message, the sender should take into consideration the receiver's:
   a. communications skills
   b. attitudes
   c. knowledge level
   d. social position
   e. culture

2. The sender should use more than one communication channel to achieve maximum effectiveness.

3. The sender should strive to insure accurate message relay.

4. The sender should insist on adequate feedback to:
    a. reduce miscommunication
    b. determine proximity of meanings
    c. measure the leader's influence

5. The sender should be:
    a. credible
    b. objective
    c. expert

6. Groups can achieve better intra-group communication by insuring adequate communication between all members and the leaders. Communication can be improved if all members can communicate with each other. However, larger groups which cannot do this can improve communication by using feedback and accurate message relay.

ENDNOTES

1. Yarborough, J. Paul. "A Model for the Analysis of Receiver Responses to Communication." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Library, Iowa State University. Ames, Iowa. 1968.

2. The material for the SMCR model was adapted for use from David K. Berol, *The Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, Chapter 3, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston. New York, 1960).

3. Yarborough, op. cit., pp. 5-7.

4. Beal, George M., et al. "Communication Impact," Rural Sociology Report No. 41. Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. 1967, pp.6-7.

5. Yarborough, op. cit., pp. 15-16.

6. Westley, Bruce H. and Malcolm S. MacLean Jr. "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research." *Dimensions in Communication*. James H. Campbell and Hal W. Helper-(editors). Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1965.

7. Yarborough, op. cit., p.20.