

## Section 2

# INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

## Key Points

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- 1 Effective Communication
- 2 Barriers to Communication
- 3 Four Steps to Effective Interpersonal Communication
- 4 The Four Types of Listening
- 5 Active Listening

How well we learn depends on our ability to elicit and comprehend information. Although [GEN Douglas] MacArthur's ability to dominate a meeting with a lengthy and highly articulate exposition is more often noted, the record shows that he was also an acute listener. In fact, when he believed he could learn from a conversation, it was his habit to listen first and refrain from speaking as much as possible.

Theodore and Donna Kinni

From T. Kinni and D. Kinni, *No Substitute for Victory: Lessons in Strategy and Leadership from General Douglas MacArthur*

## Introduction

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There are many leadership styles, but all successful leaders have one thing in common: People follow them because they communicate effectively. What does that mean? When we think of leaders with **communication** skills, we often think of powerful speakers, speakers who can persuade people to perform difficult and dangerous tasks. This is an incomplete, inaccurate picture. Yes, most leaders are also good speakers. But to be a complete leader, you must also develop excellence in all of the other communication skills: writing, reading, memory, analytic skills, and, especially, your ability to listen.

Communication is the most complex activity we perform. Briefings, gestures, and written operations orders, as well as messages through other channels such as e-mail, must all fit together to send the message that the sender intends the receiver to understand. The phrase “the commander’s intent” is one that you will hear many times as a Cadet and later as an officer. Success is more likely when, in the fog of battle, the commander communicates that intent despite the many barriers to communication.

As in all areas critical to Army leadership, good communication requires *teamwork*—in this case teamwork between senders and receivers. Of the four steps to improving interpersonal communication—focus your message, magnify the listener’s attention, penetrate barriers, and listen actively—all require communication skills on the part of both the sender and the receiver.

Leaders listen. Listening, the “most used, least trained,” of the communications skills, is not only important to a leader’s understanding of information critical to a mission’s success; it is also the gateway to understanding the needs and expectations of others, including your Soldiers, upon whom lives and the mission’s success may depend.

When communication fails, disaster follows. Take the case of MG William F. Dean, who won the Medal of Honor for his personal courage in the 20 July 1950 debacle at Taejon, South Korea, where North Korean infantry and tanks encircled and defeated poorly trained US troops. After wandering in the mountains for 36 days after the battle, MG Dean fell into the hands of the North Koreans, who held him as a prisoner of war for the next three years. One historian who has studied the defeat at Taejon writes, “On the American side, the lack of information of the true state of affairs caused by the almost complete breakdown in all forms of communication was the major factor leading to the disaster. In battle, communication is all important.”

The following vignette gives just one example of the communication breakdown MG Dean and his troops faced.

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### Miscommunication at Taejon, South Korea

Several incidents took place shortly after noon [on 20 July 1950] that, properly interpreted, should have caused deep alarm in Taejon. There was the urgent telephone call from an artillery observer who insisted on talking to the senior commander present. [COL Charles E.] Beauchamp took the call. The observer reported a large column of troops approaching Taejon from the east. He said he was positive they were enemy soldiers. The “road from the east” Beauchamp interpreted to be the Okch’on road. Beauchamp had misunderstood a conversation

#### communication

*the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver*

held with General Dean that morning to mean that Dean had ordered the 21st Infantry to leave its Okch'on position and come up to Taejon to cover the planned withdrawal. What Dean had meant was that he expected the 21st Infantry to cover the withdrawal from its Okch'on positions in such a way as to keep open the pass and the tunnels east of the city. . . . Now, receiving the report of the artillery observer, Beauchamp, with the erroneous concept in mind, thought the column was the 21st Infantry approaching Taejon to protect the exit from the city. He told the observer the troops were friendly and not to direct fire on them. Events proved that this column of troops almost certainly was not on the Okch'on road but on the Kumsan road southeast of Taejon, and that the column the observer saw was an enemy force.

Roy E. Appleman

## Effective Communication

Keeping in mind the Army's core leader competencies, leadership that gets results depends on good communication. Although communication is usually viewed as a process of providing information, communication as a competency must ensure that more than the simple transmission of information occurs. Communication must achieve a new understanding. It must create new or better awareness. The ability to communicate critical information clearly enough to reach a shared understanding of issues and solutions is an important skill. Such communication involves conveying thoughts, presenting recommendations, bridging cultural sensitivities, and reaching consensus. As a leader, you cannot lead, supervise, build teams, counsel, coach, or mentor without the ability to communicate clearly.

An important part of the two-way communication that reaches a shared understanding is active listening. Although the most important purpose of listening is to comprehend the sender's thoughts, listeners should provide an occasional indication to the speaker that they are still attentive. Active listening involves avoiding interruption and keeping mental or written notes of important points or items for clarification. Good listeners will be aware of the content of a message, but also of the urgency and emotion in its delivery. It is critical to remain aware of barriers to listening. Do not formulate a response while the other person is speaking; it prevents hearing what the speaker is saying. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by anger, disagreement with the speaker, or other things. These barriers prevent you from hearing and absorbing what the speaker has said. A good leader must be a good listener.

Communication is the transmission of messages from a *sender* (a person or group) to a *receiver* (another person or group). In a perfect world, the receiver would understand the message without difficulty. But too often, that doesn't happen. A lack of clarity, poor choice of words, distractions, and a host of other obstacles can interfere with the message. Communications theorists call this interference **noise**. Think of noise as the static in a conversation between two people talking on cell phones. The noise, or static, gets in the way of each caller communicating to the other.

### noise

whatever interferes with communication between the sender and receiver

*One-way* communication occurs when the sender expects or permits no response from the receiver—such as when you watch TV, listen to the radio, or read a book. In one-way communication, the sender has no way of knowing whether the receiver has received or understood the message. *Two-way* communication, on the other hand, allows the receiver to talk back to the sender—to give the sender **feedback**. Feedback is as important to the sender as it is to the receiver. It allows the sender to confirm whether the receiver understood the message; learn which part of the message the receiver didn't understand; and clarify the message until the receiver understands it. It also helps the receiver be certain that he or she has correctly understood what the sender meant to say. Communications theorists hold that two-way communication is the only authentic communication.

### feedback

*the receiver's response to the sender's message, which can indicate understanding, lack of understanding, misunderstanding, agreement, disagreement, desire for more information, and so on*

## Barriers to Communication

If noise is whatever interferes with communication between sender and receiver (and vice versa), it's important to understand what causes noise—what are the main barriers to communication. There are three main types of barriers: *external*, *internal*, and *semantic*.

- *External* barriers to communications include environmental and visual distractions. Suppose you are listening to your professor and suddenly you see your favorite movie star walk by in the hallway. Do you think you would hear and understand everything your professor was saying at that moment? Or maybe you're on a date and having a hard time hearing what your companion is saying because of the racket in the restaurant.
- *Internal* barriers come from within the receiver. They include not paying attention or not listening, boredom, and lack of interest. If a student is sitting in class daydreaming instead of listening to the instructor, for example, how much communication is taking place?
- *Semantic* barriers come from differences in language, education, and culture. Obviously if the sender is speaking in English and the receiver doesn't understand English, there's a problem. But even if the sender and receiver speak English, they may not speak the same dialect. The words they use may not mean the same thing. If you order a *soda* in Washington, DC, for example, you'll get a soft drink. If you order a *soda* in Detroit, you'll get a drink made of soda water and flavored syrup with ice cream floating in it. If you're from the United States and you're speaking to a Scot from Glasgow, you may have a hard time simply understanding his pronunciation. And your accent may be incomprehensible to him!

The receiver may use complicated words or phrases that the sender doesn't understand, such as "to ratiocinate" instead of "to reason," or "I am extremely appreciative of your efforts in my behalf" instead of "Thank you." Or the sender and the receiver may have cultural differences that make it difficult for them to understand each other even if they speak the same language: A Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim all worship one God, but they think about God in different ways. In some cultures, the use of titles before names is extremely important as a sign of respect, while greeting someone you've just met using his or her first name (as many Americans do) would be considered quite rude.

## Four Steps to Effective Interpersonal Communication

If you are the sender, it's your job to find ways to penetrate the noise that prevents clear communication. Following these four steps in your communication will help you do so:

1. Focus your message
2. Magnify the listener's attention
3. Penetrate barriers
4. Listen actively.

### Focus Your Message

Focusing your message means planning before you speak. Think carefully about what you want to say and how you want to say it. Decide what your goal is: to inform, to persuade, to direct, or to do something else. Be sure you understand who your audience is so you understand where the audience is coming from as it receives your message. Make sure your message is specific and concise. Get to the point; don't be diverted into side issues. Present your message politely, and be objective—state all sides' positions fairly before arguing your own. (If the listener perceives that you are biased, this itself can become an important barrier to communication.)

### Magnify the Listener's Attention

Ask yourself: Why should my listener care about what I have to say? You must create interest—make your message relevant to the listener. If your instructor suddenly announces that something will be on your next exam, you're more likely to pay attention. If you announce that what you're about to say will save your listeners money, you're likely to grab their attention. Find something in your message that your listener can relate to and make sure you highlight that.

Make it clear that your message is important. For example, if you suddenly announce that “What I'm about to say could save your life,” before you discuss a crucial safety issue, you'll grab the listener's interest. But your ideas must really *be* important. Simply *declaring* that they are won't do it—you must persuade the audience through the clarity and logic of your arguments and your evidence that your message really is significant.

Again, think about your message from the audience's perspective instead of your own. This means knowing your audience. Deliver your message so that it naturally draws your listener's attention.

### Penetrate Barriers

One serious barrier to clear communication is vagueness. If you say, “There was a fire downtown last night,” you have communicated little. If you say, however, “Twenty fire trucks from three different towns fought an inferno last night that destroyed an entire city block, including a fireworks factory,” your concrete description has communicated a good deal more. The listener now understands that you're talking about a major disaster, not a fire in a trash can. Your concrete description helps the listener create a mental picture, or *visualize* the blaze.

Be as precise and concrete as you can. Would you describe the hurricane that nearly destroyed New Orleans in 2005 as “some flooding and a lot of wind”? Don’t say, “There are a bunch of well-armed enemy fighters in front of us.” Describe them precisely: “A platoon-sized enemy force is in front of us armed with rocket-propelled grenades and supported by a tank.”

Besides description, analogies can help your message penetrate communications barriers. “Like looking for a needle in a haystack” is a cliché, but it gives a concrete idea of how difficult the task is. Find an original way to say it: “like trying to melt a glacier with a hair dryer”; “like trying to heat the moon.” Note that analogies work only if both the sender and the receiver understand the analogy’s references the same way.

Ask your audience for feedback. But be sure to ask the right kinds of questions. If you simply ask, “Did you understand me?” nine times out of 10 the listener will say, “Yes.” Ask the kinds of questions that allow you to verify that the listener really does understand:

*How many seconds can you wait after pulling the pin on a grenade before you must throw it?*

*Tell me again how many stars a lieutenant general wears.*

*What color on the traffic signal means you must stop?*

You can also ask your listener to paraphrase or repeat back to you what you just said.

Revise your message as needed to ensure that your listeners understand it. Use listener feedback to learn what they didn’t understand and find a better, clearer, less vague way to explain it. Watch your listeners’ body language carefully for signs of distraction, boredom, or lack of interest, and adjust your message as needed.

### Listen Actively

The difference between *hearing* and *listening* is as important as the difference between seeing and observing. You can *hear* background noise but not think anything of it. Or you can *listen* and realize that what sounded a minute ago like an owl sounds an awful lot like a person trying to imitate an owl.

Hearing is automatic and involuntary. It’s sound waves bouncing off your ear drums and causing them to vibrate and send messages to your brain. Listening is the active, voluntary effort to receive a message, understand it, and respond to it.

So far, this discussion has touched upon your role as speaker or message sender. But as noted before, you have a duty to be a good listener or receiver, too. As a junior officer, you’ll find that your listening skills are constantly put to the test as you receive instruction, correction, and orders from superiors and requests or complaints from subordinates.

## Critical Thinking

Looking at the opening vignette, what might MG Dean have done to be sure that COL Beauchamp understood his intent regarding the 21st Infantry?

## The Four Types of Listening

You can become a better listener by understanding the four types of listening:

- Passive
- Competitive
- Active
- Reflective.

*Passive listening* is one-way communication in which you do not provide feedback and may or may not understand the message. This kind of listening often takes place in the classroom when many students don't respond. Listening to the TV, radio, or a speaker who doesn't take questions is passive listening.

*Competitive listening* takes place when you're not really listening closely—you listen long enough to hear what you think is the necessary information (and you may or may not be right about this), and you're already thinking about what you're going to say in reply. You can hardly wait for a break in the conversation so you can jump in. This is what happens when people talk past each other in an argument, neither one listening to what the other is trying to say.



## Critical Thinking

Monitor yourself over the next few hours. How much of your listening is *competitive listening* rather than *active listening*?

*Active listening*, on the other hand, is genuine two-way communication. You are listening intently, thinking about the information to make sure you understand it, and providing feedback to the speaker to clarify what you don't understand.

*Reflective listening* goes a step further—you are not only actively listening, but are concentrating on the speaker's feelings, which the speaker might express through word choice or body language. You reflect not only on what the speaker said, but on what the speaker feels about it. A good counselor engages in this kind of listening.

Again, as the sender, it's your job to make sure the receiver heard and understood your message the way you meant it. As an active listener, you help the sender by thinking about the message, providing feedback, and seeking clarification. Don't depend on the sender to do it all. Listen actively and confirm that you understand the message.

## Active Listening

Active listening is hard work. Listening in stressful situations such as field training and combat, for example, requires focus and using all of your senses to understand the message. It also requires you to use effective feedback techniques, including “mirroring,” restating, paraphrasing, and asking for clarification. In other situations, such as briefings, there are different challenges, including mental distractions. By understanding the *thought–speech differential* (that you can listen and understand much faster than a speaker can transmit), you can more effectively absorb and analyze complex messages in situations such as a difficult class or military planning.

### Techniques for Active Listening

For active listening, you must stop thinking your own thoughts and force yourself to listen to what the speaker is saying. These techniques will help you do so.

**Clarifying.** As noted above, you ask for clarification to ensure you have understood the message. You clarify by asking specific questions:

*You referred to an AO—can you explain what an AO is?*

*I'm not sure what “shooting an azimuth” means. Could you explain it?*

*You said you met with the mullah of a mosque in Afghanistan.*

*What exactly does a mullah do? Is he like a pastor?*



**Restating, paraphrasing, or “mirroring.”** In these techniques, you restate, paraphrase, or “mirror” what the speaker said, using the speaker’s or your own words, so the speaker can verify that you have correctly understood.

*Do I understand you correctly that classes will be canceled if the temperature falls below zero degrees Fahrenheit?*

*Did you say that many fire team leaders carry a grenade launcher?*

*What I think I’m hearing you say is that you are unhappy with your choice of a major.*

**Acknowledging.** When you acknowledge, you let the speaker know that you have understood and heard the message and that you appreciate the speaker’s point of view. This doesn’t mean you have to agree with the speaker or that you should say that you agree when you don’t. Your comment can be neutral and noncommittal.

*I understand that you believe all graduate assistants should speak perfect English.*

*I appreciate the fact that you are much farther from home than most students at this college.*

*I understand that you feel you don’t fit in with the other cadets.*

**Summarizing.** Similar to restating, this is a way of reviewing progress in a conversation. You touch on the main ideas or conclusions, not all the individual points you discussed along the way. You restate the main ideas very briefly and set the tone for the next subject or conversation. This can be very useful when you are discussing several different issues.

*OK, so we agreed that I’ll work your shift on Thursday evening and you’ll work mine on Friday morning.*

*We’ve agreed that I will give you a one-week extension on the project and you will e-mail it to me by 4 p.m. on the 15th.*

*We’ve agreed that your expressions of anger are disruptive to the unit and damaging to your career and that you will attend an anger-management class during the next rating period.*

**Framing.** Use framing to test to see if the speaker is open to hearing your ideas and to draw suggested solutions from the speaker. It allows you to present information in a neutral way, find areas of agreement that you can focus on, and shape the conversation.

*We seem to agree that proper spelling and solid substance are important in a paper. How can we ensure that we have both?*

*I think we both believe that we need new equipment but that we won’t get it soon. Do you think there are ways we can make better use of what we have?*

*I can see your point that PFC Smith doesn’t seem to understand the importance of battle drills. What training do you think will help?*

*So you don’t like your college major—do you think this may be why you are getting poor grades?*

## Notetaking

A few words about taking notes: Many people make the mistake of trying to write down everything a speaker says. Notes should be notes, not a complete transcript. When you take copious notes, you're not listening. Focus on jotting down words, phrases, or the occasional sentence that will remind you of the speaker's main points or the information you need to pass your exam or complete a mission. If an instructor says, *Some differences between the Greeks and the Romans were that the Greeks were a philosophic and poetic culture, whereas the Romans were a practical and engineering culture*, you could write down *Greeks—philosophic, poetic. Romans—practical, engineering*. You can use your notes to help you apply the listening techniques above. You should review them as soon as you can after taking them, while the speaker's ideas are still fresh in your mind.

### Critical Thinking

Again referring to the opening vignette, what actions could COL Beauchamp have taken to ensure he correctly understood MG Dean's intent regarding the 21st Infantry? How might the forward observer have supported his insistence that he was seeing enemy, not friendly, forces?

### Critical Thinking

How does the saying, "A message that can be misunderstood will be misunderstood" apply to Army communication, especially under stressful conditions?



# CONCLUSION

Leaders must be able to communicate their understanding and their intent to those who must carry out their instructions. It will be especially critical to you as an Army junior officer to efficiently and accurately communicate information to your noncommissioned officers and Soldiers—whether that information is the enemy’s current location and strength, the commander’s intent for accomplishing the mission, or the actions your unit must take upon seizing an objective. You’ll also need to give clear, concise, and easily understood reports to your superior officers and to brief other unit leaders about information your unit has gathered.

At the same time, you need to be an effective listener. You must listen actively to your superiors to make sure you understand their instructions. You also must listen to your NCOs and Soldiers, who will have information about the mission, the unit, or themselves that you need to know. Finally, you have to listen to your listeners, to make sure they have understood your message.

## Key Words

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**communication**

**noise**

**feedback**

## Learning Assessment

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1. What are the four steps to effective interpersonal communications and how do you distinguish among them?
2. In what way is listening a critical communication skill?
3. What are three techniques for active listening?

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