LECTURE 1
SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL GROUNDS
OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Communication is the key to success in any business. Whether you are trying to sell a product, answer a query or complaint or convince your colleagues to adopt a certain course of action, good communication often means the difference between success and failure. At best, imprecise language, clumsy sentences or long-winded 'waffle', whether in speech or writing, will give a poor impression of you or your business; at worst, what you are trying to say will be misunderstood or ignored. In contrast, clear, precise English will be enjoyable to read or listen to, and is likely to evoke the response you want.

We communicate in business for a number of different reasons, and the methods we use will depend on the reasons, the circumstances, and perhaps the people with whom we are communicating. These are some of the reasons why we may need to communicate with others in a business setting: to pass on information, to discuss an issue, to recommend a course of action, to make or answer a request, to make or answer a complaint, to keep a record of something that has happened or been agreed, to explain or clarify a situation, to give an instruction.

Communication occurs whenever there is a meaningful interchange between two or more people. You might be tempted to insert the words 'of information' in that terse definition, but there are at least two good reasons not to. One is that a great deal of communication occurs at the unconscious sensory level. This is not strictly information, but data. Data only becomes information when it is structured to elicit some form of meaning. The second is that, in addition to the transfer of data and information, communication may also transfer knowledge (information structured in a way that makes it useful for making

choices or decisions); skills (knowledge and information translated into practical application or know-how); and wisdom (the ability to extrapolate from data, information, knowledge and skills to tackle new situations).

The definition of communication in many management texts is based on a model first popularized in the 1950s, the so-called mathematical theory of communication. This was developed from work on telecommunications systems. It aimed to show how information is transmitted from source to destination and to analyse what can affect the quality of the information during this process.

In essence, communication is a contract between individuals, the organization and each other. Communication only works when people are willing to engage with others. The quality of communication depends on whether the 'contract' is one of listening, discussing or genuine dialogue. Improving the quality of communication takes time and sustained energy. It can be useful to think of the journey as one towards communication maturity, which is in effect the ability of individuals and the organization to engage in continuous dialogue that leads to action.

Receptivity is the process, in which people attend to, process and filter what they hear. Receptivity varies according to:

- the receiver's interest in the topic. (Is it relevant to me? Does it trigger any specific connections for me?) For example, visiting a new country, or establishing a relationship with someone from there, often provides a mental link that alerts the brain to references to that place. The more points of association you have with the place, the more likely you are to respond with attention, even if you then dismiss the information as irrelevant.
- the perceived urgency of the message, in the perception of the receiver. In direct speech, we convey urgency through the tone, speed and volume of

communication. Newspapers deal with the same problem and so on through banner headlines and e-mails may attach a red exclamation mark. However, misuse of the urgent signal (again, as perceived by the receiver) makes it less effective.

- the receiver's conscious or unconscious emotions towards the topic. (Do I feel pleasure, discomfort or neutral thinking about this?) We are generally much more likely to pay attention to topics we find pleasurable than those we find painful. However, when the communication concerns something, about which we have a high level of fear, then we will tend to 'switch on' as our survival mechanisms take over.

- the receiver's attitude towards the transmitter. (Do they view the source as credible and well intentioned?)

- the timing of the communication. It is a lot easier to concentrate at some times than at others. In general, people are less likely to absorb information when their attention is focused on a close deadline or when they are working at full stretch.

- the receiver's general emotional state. (Are they relaxed, or under stress?)

- the meaning – both intellectual and emotional – that the receiver attaches to key words and phrases. For example, the word 'committee' may be very neutral to the sender, but may conjure up a picture of bureaucracy, time-wasting and boredom to the receiver, based on their previous experience and preconceptions. When communication crosses cultural divides, then this problem can be greatly exacerbated.

- people's individual preference, for how they receive information. (For example, do they respond best to text, to visual representations, or a mixture of both?)

The importance of face-to-face communication in organizations has been recognized by both business managers and organizational theorists for many years. For example, we know from research that managers spend enormous amounts of time in conversation, meetings and discussion. How effective is this major investment in time and energy? What can managers (and, of course, other staff) do to 'improve' their interpersonal communication, and what do we mean by 'improvement'?

What does effective interpersonal communication involve? One answer to the question posed by the heading to this section is that we need 'good' interpersonal skills so we can respond or react to the other person or persons in ways which appear 'natural' and which are 'effective'. This suggests that we have accurately assessed what the other person is trying to communicate, and that accurate assessment depends upon how we perceive that other person. But what if our perception is misleading? The most common 'polite' English expression would be to say this phrase with a slight rise in intonation on the last word (assuming that the person does not have a strong regional accent for which different rules might apply).

Various methods have been proposed over the years to develop interpersonal skills. For example, in the 1990s many organizations were persuaded of the importance of personal understanding and interpersonal abilities by the best-selling books on 'emotional intelligence'. This concept emphasized self-awareness and the importance of handling relationships: 'a new competitive reality is putting emotional intelligence at a premium in the workplace and in the marketplace'. Goleman and others argued that organizations which failed to recognize or value these skills in their employees would simply not generate the trust, co-operation and creativity which are needed for long-term success.