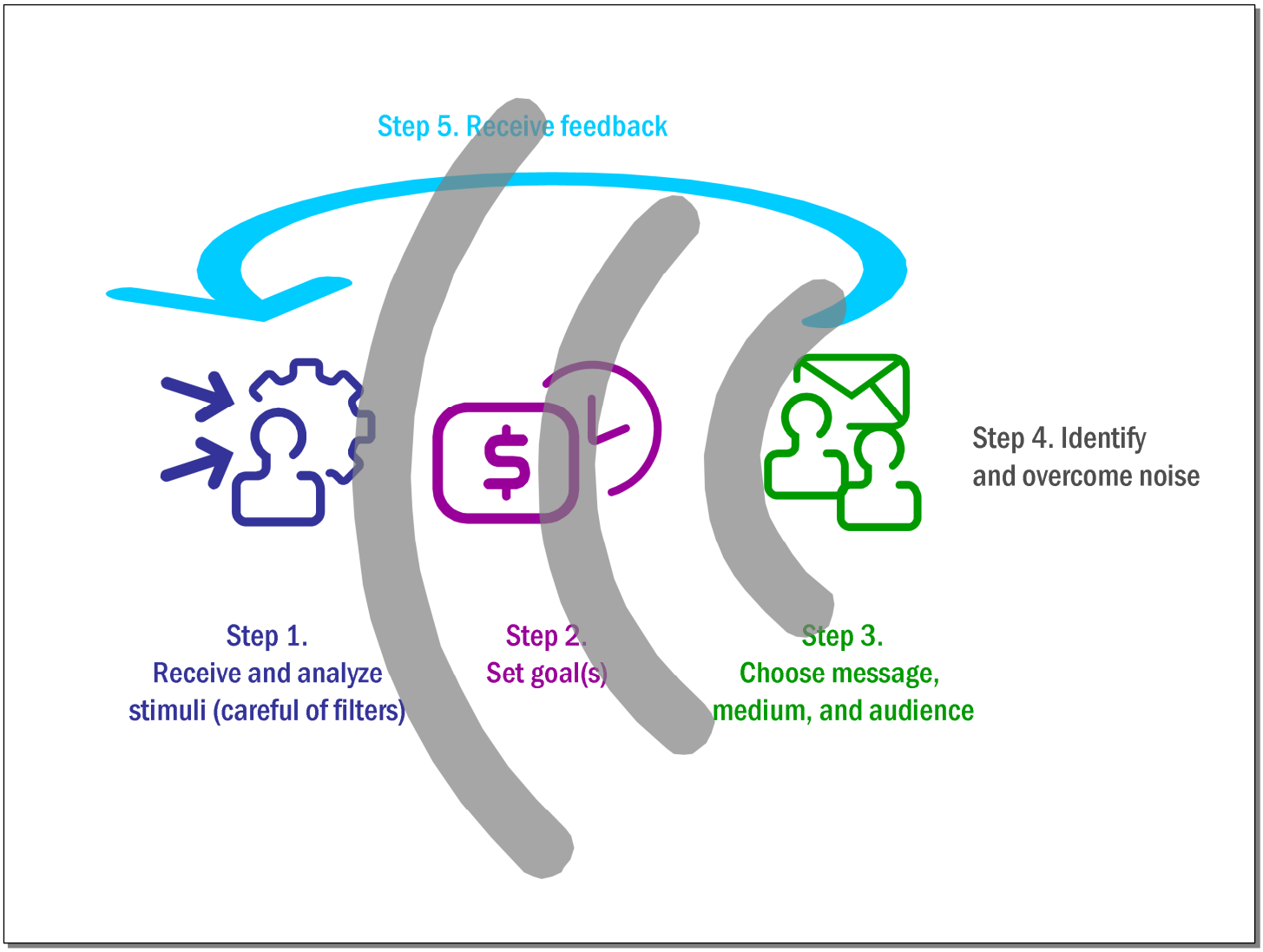
THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS



Communicating, the process of transmitting a message from one person to another or to a group of people, can be complex. Over the years, various commentators including Aristotle, Berlo, Becker, and more have proposed models to help people understand this interaction. I've borrowed some of their best ideas and combined them into a simple model that works well to understand how we email and to help diagnose email problems.

Step one: RECEIVE and ANALYZE STIMULI

The process begins when something catches our attention and makes us want to communicate. Our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin receive signals as we go about our daily routine: the sound of kids or roommates moving around in the morning, visual images of traffic on the road ahead on the way to work, the smell of our coworker's popcorn, and the vibration of our wireless device indicating someone has sent us an email. Each of these signals provides an opportunity to communicate. We can choose to say hello to the roommate, call a friend to warn her about traffic, ask our officemate to share the popcorn, and respond to the email we just received. Sometimes, we pick up subtle stimuli; other times we miss important signals.

Analyzing the stimuli we receive is one of the most complex and error-prone steps of the process. Sometimes we must process dozens of stimuli at a time and analyze them while we perform other actions like walking, talking, and typing. Each time we receive a stimulus, we assign some values to it. Is this a stimulus we like or dislike? Is it similar to something we have received before? Does it indicate danger? Do we know and trust the source? Should the stimulus be taken at face value, or does it need to be interpreted to find the true meaning? Each of us would label a stimulus differently, based on our life experience, education, and beliefs.

A combat veteran would likely flag the sound of an explosion as danger, while a fireworks technician would not. A liberal would label comments from a conservative talk radio host as suspicious, while those same comments would be labeled as trustworthy when analyzed by a fan of the show. As we mature and process more and more stimuli, we build up a storehouse of

information about the signals we have received and the sources of those signals. We eventually learn a midnight call from Mom is probably an emergency, while a midnight call from a drinking buddy might not be. After marking a stimulus as safe or dangerous, trusted or doubted, serious or joking, we make perhaps the most important decision about the stimulus: whether we should respond or not.

The accumulated experiences that influence how we interpret stimuli are called filters. If I've been bitten by a dog, any stimulus from a dog might cause me to be afraid. If I've always gotten good advice from my sister, I might give her comments more weight than identical comments from a stranger. These filters are subtle and powerful. An excellent experiment done by professor John Bargh from Yale and Lawrence Williams from U.C. Boulder shows just how subtle and powerful they can be.

Study participants were met in the lobby of a building by a greeter carrying a cup of coffee (sometimes hot, sometimes iced), a clipboard, and two books. Participants were casually asked to hold the coffee while the greeter wrote their name on the clipboard. Participants then completed a personality questionnaire about someone they had never met. Those who held hot coffee rated the target's personality significantly warmer than those who held iced coffee.[1] Participants filtered the stimuli in the survey based on an unrelated 5-second encounter with a hot or cold cup. Imagine how we filter the stimuli we receive based on years of prolonged exposure to all kinds of things!

If you asked those study participants why they rated some people's personalities warmer than others, it is unlikely they would cite coffee as a reason. They would surely fabricate some realistic-sounding explanation for why they rated people the way they did. If you ask someone why they rate your email poor, they likely wouldn't cite a fight they had with their boss, a bad movie they saw last night, or traffic on the way to work. Nonetheless, these factors, and the resulting filters, may have as strong an impact on the reading of your message as your choice of words.

For example, a 2004 study asked workers if they agreed with the statement "emails I receive are easy to read." Not unexpectedly, some people strongly disagreed, some agreed, and some strongly agreed. When researchers dug deeper, they discovered people who felt their email was easy to ready were receiving about 16 messages per day. People who felt messages were difficult to read were receiving an average of 34 messages. Respondents were labeling messages as easy to read not based on message content, but based on how many other messages they faced.[2] Filters are powerful.

For many people, the analysis and labeling take place entirely at the subconscious level. Excellent communicators, however, have learned to interrupt this automatic labeling, especially when a stimulus is important, distressing, or otherwise unusual. Rather than accepting their gut reaction to these stimuli, they pause and think critically to arrive at a logical analysis before proceeding. Instead of letting the coffee cup influence their impressions of someone, they carefully evaluate the stimuli for what they are. Instead of judging a message difficult to read based on how many other messages are in the inbox, they pause to carefully evaluate the words on the screen. This is difficult to do.

I recently snuck a snowball into my friend's house and threw it over a high counter to hit him in the shoulder. He immediately yelled at his 3-year-old son for bringing snow into the house. Had he paused to analyze the stimulus (a snowball crashed into his shoulder at high velocity and exploded, 6 feet off the floor) he would have realized that his son has neither the height nor the strength to pull of such a feat. Apparently my friend had developed a strong filter automatically labeling thrown objects as "from son." I admitted my guilt, and we had a good laugh. Unfortunately, in a professional setting, we often allow these automatic analyses to go unchecked, and we respond to stimuli inappropriately. We may discount a good idea because it comes from someone we've had bad experiences with. Instead of labeling it "interesting idea," we label it "info from someone we don't trust." We may feel aggravated by an otherwise good email simply because it contains a word we associate with annoyance. Automatic labeling may quicken our response time, but it can also undermine our effectiveness if not balanced out with the occasional conscious analysis.

We can use filters to our advantage. By learning about the parties we email, we can begin to map out their filters. If we know someone loves the word "challenge" and hates the word "problem," we can write messages using the appropriate vocabulary to trip a positive filter or avoid a negative one. If our boss comes in early and stays late, sending a message to him at 9 pm instead of 9 am might allow him to label our message as "from a hard worker." I do not advocate manipulating someone in an unethical way, but I do advocate learning as much as possible about email recipients and using that knowledge to make our messages more effective, thereby benefiting us and them. People's gut reactions come not from what we write, but from the thoughts that spring to mind when they read what we write. Understanding this distinction makes all the difference.

Step two: SET GOAL(S)

People interested in improving communication skills often ask questions like "did I do the right thing in this situation?" "how should I have worded my message?" or "was this the proper medium to reach this audience?" These questions are best answered with another question: "did the message achieve its goal?" If the goal was to get a raise, and a raise was granted, then the right thing was probably done. If the goal was to increase sales, and the mailing did so, then mail was likely the right medium. At classes and seminars, businesspeople display a shocking lack of knowledge of their own communications goals. It is not uncommon to hear an exchange like the following:

Attendee:	Did I send the right message?
Moderator:	What was your goal?
Attendee:	I was simply replying to a message I received.
Moderator:	Why?
Attendee:	What do you mean?

People occasionally fall into an unproductive rhythm where they react to every stimulus they receive, rather than labeling some stimuli as "requires response," and others as "no response needed." When considering a stimulus, ask "if I respond, what

do I hope to accomplish?" If the answer is "prove that I'm right," "make a point," "I don't know," or anything that does not directly help you or your career, consider ignoring that stimulus and going on to something more important. If you can articulate a specific goal, then responding may be worth your effort. Remind yourself to respond, not react.

After receiving a stimulus and deciding to respond, we can choose from hundreds of possible goals ranging from "share information," to "provoke action," to "end this conversation." The goals can be vague such as "get a favorable response" or detailed like "get her to sign the contract by Thursday at noon without causing a long discussion."

Step three: CHOOSE MESSAGE, MEDIUM, AUDIENCE

On August 5, 1789, George Washington had a goal in mind: change U.S. policy. He knew Congress was the audience in the best position to help, and he thought either writing or speaking would be effective for reaching that audience. Trying to determine which of those two media would be most effective, he sent a letter to James Madison asking "whether would an oral or written communication be best?" He also asked Madison to improve the first draft of the message to Congress by "adding to, or takening out, such parts as you may think had better be expunged."[3]

Like Washington, with a strong goal in mind, you can choose a message, medium, and audience together. As you contemplate your options, you can ask "what choices will maximize the chances I'll achieve my goal?" This part of the process can best be explained by examples:

Example #1

I want to go to an afternoon sporting event next week with my coworker, Ron, and we'll need approval from our boss, Sue to leave work at noon on Wednesday. I might decide to request the time from the boss directly by emailing her a straight-forward message like "Hi, Sue. I would like to go to the game next week with Ron. Would it be possible to leave work at noon on Wednesday? Thanks, Steven." Or, if Ron has a great relationship with Sue, I might consider calling him to see if he can request time for both of us. "Hey, Ron. When you ask off for the game Wednesday, would you mind asking Sue on behalf both of us?" Or, I might decide Sue since Sue is a sports fan, inviting her might work out for the best. Ron and I could visit Sue together with a message like "Good morning. I know you're a big fan of the team, and you like for the department to attend social events together, so I was wondering if you might be interested in going to the game next Wednesday with me and Ron." Presumably, she'd want more details, and when she learned the game was at noon, she'd draw the conclusion that we'd need time off. Each of the options has the same goal: "get time off Wednesday afternoon." Each option uses a different combination of message, audience, and medium to achieve that goal. The question to ask is, based on what you know about the situation, which combination of message, medium, and audience has the best chance of getting you the time off?

Example #2

I need to ask a company if I can use their auditorium for an event. I could write a letter to the president of the company saying "Dear Mr. Wallace, We are hosting a kickoff meeting for our volunteer organization's Spring cleanup. Would it be possible to hold our meeting in your auditorium some time in March? A brochure is attached. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have. Sincerely, Steven Birmingham." Or, I might call the public relations officer at the company and say something like "Good morning, Mrs. Jones. I work with the Baker Creek Community Group. We're looking for a place to hold a small meeting in the Spring. It was suggested your company likes to help community groups, and I heard you have a fantastic auditorium." Finally, I might choose to email a friend who works at the company with a message like "Hey, Sally. How are you and the kids? Did you have a good time at the concert? You know that community group I'm in? We need a space to hold our Spring cleanup kickoff meeting. Could you ask around to see how I could arrange to hold it in your company's auditorium?" As in the previous example, each of the options has the same goal, in this case: "secure the auditorium for the meeting." Each option uses a different combination of message, audience, and medium to achieve that goal. The question to ask is, based on what you know about the situation, which combination of message, medium, and audience has the best chance of getting you the auditorium?

Each time we decide to respond to a stimulus, especially to an inbound email, we should think about the best message, medium, and audience for the response. Perform this analysis carefully, because nothing prevents us from choosing an incompatible combination of message, medium, and audience. We might accidentally send "let's get drunk tonight" to everyone at our organization, or email "the building is on fire" when yelling through the office would be better. In the next chapter, we'll take a critical look at the tasks email is well-suited for, and those that are better left to a visit or phone call. We'll also look at scientifically-proven ways to make the message (the body of an email) more effective by manipulating length, word choice, style, punctuation, complexity, jargon, and emoticons.

Step four: IDENTIFY and OVERCOME NOISE

In a perfect world, we could receive and analyze stimuli, set a goal, choose the message, medium, and audience, and then receive feedback indicating we achieved our goal. Of course, we do not live in a perfect world. In the real world, we must contend with noise. Noise interferes with every step of the communication process. It hampers our receipt of stimuli. It makes it difficult to focus on choosing the best combination of audience, message, and medium. It impedes the effective flow of feedback. In the worst cases, it can cause communications to grind to a screeching halt, as it did with the first electronic message ever sent.

> So, Charley typed the L, and he said "Did you get the L?" "Yes, I got the L" came back the reply from SRI. "Did you get the O?" "Yes, I got the O." "Did you get the G?" Crash![4]
>
> — Len Kleinrock describing how the first instant message sent over ARPANET was stopped by a computer crash in 1969

What makes up this noise? Noise can be actual sounds that make it difficult to hear in a meeting or on a phone call. It can be

technical problems like computer errors or bad connections that impede our ability to communicate with email and wireless devices. It can be hundreds of other stimuli competing for the attention of people we correspond with. Whatever the form, noise makes every step of the process more difficult, and can cause a communications breakdown at any step. Although "identify and overcome noise" is listed as step four, we need to be aware of noise and try to overcome it through the first three steps and the final step as well.

Communicators need to understand the noise they face so they adjust their communications to overcome it. For example:

> A meeting facilitator might raise his voice to overcome audible noise from the lawnmower outside the window.
>
> An emailer might change to a phone call to overcome the virtual noise of hundreds of other unread messages in the recipient's inbox.
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> A student might raise her hand higher to be seen above the visual noise of dozens of other hands in the air.
>
> A cell phone caller might switch to a visit to overcome the technical noise of poor cell phone reception in a certain area.
>
> As you can see, adjustments to combat noise can include changing message, medium, and audience, or changing characteristics of the message like timing or volume.

Step five: RECEIVE FEEDBACK

With our goal in mind, after sending a message via the chosen medium to the selected audience, we wait for feedback to indicate whether our goal has been achieved. For example, if our goal was "get her to sign the contract by Thursday at noon without causing a long discussion," a signed contract on our desk would mean we had succeeded. If our goal was to end a conversation, the feedback we're looking for is silence, so any stimulus coming back probably indicates we've missed the mark.

Many times, however, the feedback we receive is not so specific or clear. Negative or ambiguous feedback acts as a new stimulus, sending us back to step one of the communication process. We analyze this stimulus to determine what went wrong and whether we need to communicate further. If we have not yet reached our goal, and further communication is in order, we can ask "based on this feedback, how can I change the message, medium, and audience to receive the feedback I'm looking for?" Or, "how can I overcome noise to increase the chances I'll achieve my goal?"

Communication Process Summary

1. Receive and analyze stimuli
2. Set goal(s)
3. Choose message, medium, audience to best achieve the goals
4. Identify and overcome noise
5. Receive feedback and repeat the process if necessary

References

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[3] Letter from George Washington to James Madison. August 5, 1789.

[4] Charles Petrie Interview of Laurence Kleinrock. Supercomputing Conference, Pittsburgh, 1996.