Explain the Nature and Process of Communication

1.1 COMMUNICATION IS INTEGRAL TO HUMAN LIFE. Communication is deeply intertwined with the human existence. It is an integral part of it. One cannot think of human life without communication. Can you imagine what would happen if you are not allowed to talk for a long time? You would feel suffocated.

In personal life, we need to communicate to deal with various concerns and problems of daily life. In professional life also, it is communication that helps us to build healthy relations and credibility with co-workers.

Only speaking/talking is not communication. Communication can take place in many forms. Sometimes, we communicate by ‘talking’ about our ideas, thoughts or emotions; at other times, we may wish to communicate through the written word or even non-verbally. Whatever form we choose, getting the message across is what communication is all about.

Communication is a process that is dynamic, continuous, and irreversible but at the same time, it is reciprocal in nature. It is an ongoing process.

Roughly, we can define communication as a shared meaning between two or more individuals. The shared meaning arises out of the individual’s experiences, background, education and training. Similarity in experiences, background, training, etc. makes communication successful between individuals.

Communication helps us to understand others. The inability to communicate can lead to a lot of problems both personally and professionally.

Imagine a day without communicating! We can instantly feel the void it would create. Can we ever forget that it is our ability to communicate verbally that distinguishes us from animals? Communication helps form a powerful bond among people and makes us social beings.

Besides, knowledge is not the sole requirement for the achievement of success. A person may possess good knowledge, but his/her performance will be evaluated largely on the basis of his/her ability to communicate. Therefore, if you are a good communicator, you have better chances of success in life and in business.

1.2 COMMUNICATION FOR BUSINESS

Communication has become indispensable today. Human activity will come to a standstill if there is no communication. All human transactions become possible only through communication. It is the life-blood of every business organization. Especially in today’s globalized market economy, effective communication is vital to the success and survival of any organization.

Businesses need people with good communication skills because communication is an essential part of the kind of work that is done in business organizations. It extends across all areas of business, including managerial, technical, clerical and social positions.

In present times, several factors have contributed to the significance of communication. They are-

* faster means of communication because of scientific and technological advancements
* shrinking geographical boundaries because of the availability of faster means of transport
* growth of the multinational companies that has resulted in the creation of a globalized market economy
* generation of highly advanced management techniques as a result of the growing importance of professionalism in the management of business
* the information revolution that has brought with it highly sophisticated networking technologies
* multiplication of systems of communication at all levels of organization because of specialized knowledge that has lead to departmentalization
* advancements in the field of social sciences such as in psychology and in sociology that have created an awareness about the human mind and behaviour and how they influence communication

Communication undertaken by a business organization with the purpose of achieving certain specific goals is known as business communication. In fact, business communication is a special type of communication undertaken to meet the needs of the organization. Powerful concepts in modern management like participation, motivation, involvement revolve around communication.

According to R. Ludlow, “Business communication is a process of transfer of information and understanding between different parts and people of a business organization. It consists of various modes and media involved in communication interchanges.”

Effective communication is needed for growth and development of any organization. H.G. Hicks has rightly pointed out- “Communication is basic to an organization’s existence from birth of the organization; when communication stops, organized activity ceases to exist.” Improving communication skills improves the chances for success of a business. Effective communication brings progress and prosperity to it.

Moreover, in this age of specialization, planning, production, sales, advertising, finance, welfare, etc. are handled by different departments. In absence of effective communication, there would be a serious problem of co-ordination among these departments and there would only be chaos and confusion in the organization.

Communication is also quite significant keeping in mind the growing importance of human relations and human resource management in today’s world. Communication helps a manager in developing meaningful relationships with the subordinates, changing their attitudes, boosting their morale and soliciting their cooperation.

Communication links people together to achieve common goals. It is also required to maintain good public relations. Thus, executives are often expected to give speeches and interviews to the media in order to project a favourable image of the organization.

Effective communication is required to handle various crises and conflicts of interests in an organization. It is also needed in order to impart adequate training to the employees in handling latest technology. Subordinates often resent the introduction of changes in the methods of working. This poses a challenge to the management to educate the employees so that they can smoothly adapt to the dynamic character of the organization. They also have to work at alleviating the fear that these changes are likely to generate unemployment.

Thus, effective communication can help in changing the negative attitude of the employees towards technological advancement. It facilitates meetings which play an important role in the functioning of an organization. Effective business communication depends not only on the skills of the sender of the message but also on the skills of the one who receives that message.

Thus, one may say that communication is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to achieve an end.

1.3 PRE-REQUISITES OF COMMUNICATION

Now the question is- What is communication and how it can be accomplished? What do we require to carry out communication? Hence, prior to looking at the meaning of communication, it would be helpful to know how we prepare for it.

For instance, you want to write a letter. What all do you need for it? A piece of paper. A pen. A desk for support. Is there anything else that you require besides these things? Certainly you do. You need to dwell on three important things-

1. Purpose 2. Content 3. Skills

These three precede all speaking or writing.

WHAT TO COMMUNICATE- CONTENT

Information

Observation/ Receive by Select/Reject Think and Understanding

Attention listening or as per your evaluate results into

by reading ‘interest’, ‘need’ the information knowledge

or ‘expectation’

This is how information is processed in to being knowledge. Knowledge generates in you the confidence to communicate. If you are well prepared with the content, then half the work is done.

It is the urge to express ‘something’ that begins communication. It can be an idea, an emotion, an opinion or some information. Without this basic idea/need, there can be no communication.

However, we do not communicate whatever comes to our mind immediately. There is a need to plan- what to communicate, how to communicate and whom to communicate it to. We do not communicate without a purpose; therefore, it is essential to answer these questions before actually communicating. This helps us to communicate effectively and to get a desirable response from the person with whom we are exchanging our ideas.

WHY TO COMMUNICATE- PURPOSE

Speaker’s/ will hear/see

Purpose of Writer’s Listener/

Communication Expectation Reader will listen/read

will understand

will act/respond

THE PURPOSE IS FULFILLED

Purpose is the primary pre-requisite of all meaningful communication. The sender initiates communication with some purpose i.e. expectation. S/he expects the receiver to hear/see his message, to listen/read it attentively, to understand it and to act/respond to it. When the receiver gives feedback or performs the expected action, then communication is said to be successful. However, the response would depend on various factors like concentration, physical surroundings and psychological makeup of the receiver.

The next question is- how do we communicate? Communication does not just mean speaking or writing. We are communicating even when we smile or shrug our shoulders. However, when we decide to communicate, we need some medium through which to transfer that idea to the other person.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE- SKILLS

You may possess good knowledge and may be ready to convey it but if you do not know how to do it, it would not be effective. Poor speaking or writing skills is a real hurdle in communication.

Speaking Skills

Read aloud: Take a small piece of writing from a newspaper, magazine or a book and read it out loud. This will help you to know how you speak- your voice tone, pitch, etc.

Observe: Observe how people speak- their pronunciation, accent, intonation, stress, style, rhythm, etc. Try to emulate the speaking style of good speakers. This will help you to improve your own style of speaking.

(For a detailed note on speaking skills, writing skills and non-verbal communication, refer Chapter 2 Types of Communication.)

Just the idea/information that the communicator has, the media of transmission available and the presence of the receiver are not enough for communication to take place. We need a proper context and an atmosphere where there are no hindrances in the communication process.

Does communication end after the idea is communicated? As stated earlier, we communicate with a purpose. Expression of the idea/information is half the work done. But communication is considered complete only when there is some response from the receiver. Only then we can say that the purpose of communication is fulfilled.

Communication involves three basic activities on the part of both the participants i.e. the sender and the receiver.

On the sender’s part, they are-

Thinking to develop the content to form a message

Speaking/Writing to convey the message to the other person

Feeling to make the message persuasive

On the receiver’s part, the activities include-

Listening/Reading to absorb the idea/information contained in the message

Interpreting to understand the meaning of the message

Responding to convey the acceptance or the disagreement with the message

Communication has always been an important part of human life. Language and the ability to express ourselves using that language come to us spontaneously. And the need to communicate is so inherent in human nature that we hardly realize that effective communication skills can be acquired and honed.

There are four basic communication skills- speaking, writing, listening and reading. They always work in the following adjacency pairs-

Speaking/writing is handled by the sender of the message and listening/reading by the receiver of the message. Mastering these four skills is very essential if one wants to become an effective communicator.

As children, we learn to speak by listening first. Thus, listening is the first skill that we acquire as we develop the language instinct. Then follows the reading skills once we start schooling and lastly we learn the writing skills as a part of our formal education.

Thus, learning language/s and the related communication skills follow a systematic process. It does not happen accidentally and instantaneously.

Despite of this, people often turn out to be poor communicators as most of us tend to take its importance for granted. Most of the time, we fail to achieve our objective while we communicate. This happens because of our failure to convey our ideas in a precise and clearly understandable manner. There may be a lack either in the content of the message or in the way in which it is conveyed to the intended audience, or both.

The point is we do not normally focus much on ‘what to communicate’, ‘when to communicate’ and ‘how to communicate’. Also, we need to consider another equally important aspect ‘why to communicate’ i.e. the purpose.

Thus, it is very important for us to recognize and study the essential elements involved in the process of communication in order to become effective communicators.

Every aspect of life, whether personal, social or professional, involves communication. The basic meaning of the word ‘communication’ is- “an exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behaviour”. The meaning of the word has not undergone much change. However, the ways and means of communication have changed greatly as a result of technological and other socio-cultural developments in recent times.

Thus, these advancements have added numerous new dimensions to the communication process, which has become more complex over a period of time. It, thus, calls for a detailed study of the various components that are involved in it in order to be able to communicate effectively.

1.4 DEFINING COMMUNICATION

In order to understand the term communication, it would be useful to have a look at some definitions given by the experts.

The word ‘communication’ is derived from the Latin word ‘communis’ which means ‘to transmit’, ‘to impart’, ‘to exchange’, ‘to share’, or ‘to convey’.

Communication means “the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium.” (Oxford English Dictionary)

Communication is “a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding, in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information but also create and share meaning.” (Business Dictionary)

According to Newman and Summer, “Communication is an exchange of facts, ideas, opinions or emotions by two or more persons.”

Keith Davis states “Communication is a process of passing information and understanding from one person to another.”

F.G. Meyer defines communication as “the intercourse by words, letters or messages, the intercourse of thoughts or opinions. It is the act of making one’s ideas and opinions known to others.”

In the words of Theo Haimann, “Communication is the process of passing information and understanding from one person to anotherâ€¦ it is the process of imparting ideas and making oneself understood by others.”

According to C.G. Brown, “Communication has been defined as the transfer of information from one person to another, whether or not it elicits confidence or becomes an exchange or interchange. But the information transferred must be understandable to the receiver.”

William Scott defines communication as “a process which involves the transmission and accurate replication of ideas ensured by feedback for the purpose of eliciting actions which will accomplish organizational goals.”

Louis A. Allen says, “Communication is the sum of all the things which a person does when he wants to create understanding in the mind of another. It involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening, and understanding”.

According to McFarland, “Communication may be broadly defined as the process of meaningful interaction among human beings. More specifically, it is a process by which meanings are perceived and understanding is reached among human beings.”

These definitions explain communication as

* “a process of passing information and understanding” (Keith Davis)
* “a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding” (Business Dictionary)
* “the act of making one’s ideas and opinions known to others” (F.G. Meyer)
* “the process of imparting ideas and making oneself understood by others” (Theo Haimann)
* “the transmission and accurate replication of ideas ensured by feedback for the purpose of eliciting actions” (William Scott)
* “a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening, and understanding” (Louis A. Allen)
* “a process by which meanings are perceived and understanding is reached among human beings” (McFarland)

Thus, these definitions adequately highlight and express in concise form the important features of the process of communication. In short, we can define communication as “a process in which two or more elements of a system interact in order to achieve a desired outcome or goal.” (Larry L. Barker and Deborah A. Gaut, Communication; 2001)

1.5 FEATURES OF COMMUNICATION

On the basis of the above discussion, let us now discuss certain important features of the process of communication.

1. It is an exchange of ideas.

Communication is the process through which an exchange of information takes place. It is the sharing of information, ideas, concepts and messages.

2. Two parties are involved in it.

In communication, the exchange of information takes place between two or more persons. This implies that there are minimum two people involved in the communication process at any given time.

The one who initiates the exchange is the sender of the message (speaker/writer) and the one who receives and interprets it is the receiver of the message (listener/reader).

3. It is a two-way process.

Communication is a two-way process of exchanging ideas or information. One person alone cannot carry out communication. When you communicate, there has to be a receiver or an audience that would reciprocate. Then only your communication can be complete.

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Thus, communication is a process of transmitting and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages. It is considered effective only when it achieves the desired reaction or response from the receiver. The response may be positive or negative. In case of absence of any response, communication is incomplete.

Thus, communication is effective only when a concise and clear message is delivered well, received successfully, understood fully, and responded to promptly.

1.6 OBJECTIVES OF COMMUNICATION

There is no human action that is done without any purpose. Even the simplest and most natural action like breathing has a purpose- to stay alive. Communication is also always carried out with some purpose. (Refer ‘1.3 Pre-requisites of Communication’)

Communication begins with two-fold objectives or purposes that occupy the sender’s mind:

Immediate or Primary to convey or to share

Objectives information

of

Communication

Ultimate or Secondary to convince or to

persuade people

To inform and to persuade are the two basic purposes (goals) that are ever present in the mind of a communicator. Sometimes, he seeks only to inform, as in scientific writings; sometimes, his goal is to persuade the reader, as in journalistic writings; and oftentimes, he wants both to inform and to persuade the reader, as in sales letters, advertisements, etc.

Communication is vital to business. The communication activities of an organization fall into three broad categories:

1. Intra-organisational

Communication FORMAL

Business 2. Inter-organisational

Communication Communication

3. Personal INFORMAL

Communication

1. Intra-Organisational Communication

It is communication within an organization. It is done to implement business plans. It takes many forms like orders, instructions, reports, emails, etc.

2. Inter-Organisational Communication

It is communication that a business organization does with people outside the organization i.e. with other companies, customers, clients, general public, etc. It takes the form of planned publicity to improve its image and public relations with the help of business messages, advertising, displays, etc.

The success of a business depends on its ability to fulfill the customers’ needs. Besides providing services, it must communicate effectively with outside people and groups for its success.

3. Personal Communication

It is communication without a specific business objective i.e. without an ulterior motive or purpose. Man is a social animal, therefore we have a compulsive need to communicate even when we have nothing substantial to convey. Such communication also occurs in the workplace. For example, personal conversations, gossip, Grapevine phenomenon, etc. If one is not allowed to engage in such casual communication, it may lead to frustration and other such psychological problems.

(For a more detailed discussion on corporate communication, refer Chapter 7 Formal and Informal Networks of Communication.)

The primary objective of communication is to convey or share information. Business organizations have to deal with a large and varied amount of information on a daily basis in order to conduct various business activities. Thus, proper flow of information helps them to make right decisions.

Another equally important objective of communication is to persuade people to accept a point of view or to change their attitude and accept a new or modified attitude. Persuasion is achieved through logical arguments or an emotional appeal to accept the change. Advertisements are an apt example of the persuasive nature of communication. Essentially, all communication is a deliberate and intentional act of persuasion. A communicator wants the reader not only to understand the message but also to be influenced as intended by him. (For a detailed discussion, refer ‘10.6 Persuasive Communication’, Chapter 10 Nature of Attitude and its Influence on Communication)

Communication helps to convey information from experts to trainees in an organization for the purpose of educating or training them to handle new technology or to adapt to the changes in the work environment.

Communication is an effective tool in the hands of the managers to motivate and to boost the morale of the employees. This enables the organization to achieve higher productivity. Through advice and counseling, the management can help the employees in dealing with their emotional problems as well as problems pertaining to maladjustment and also to give career guidance. By means of letters of appreciation, special mention in reports, minutes of meetings, etc., the management can appreciate the work of the employees. In case of strikes, lockouts, and dismissal of individual employees or disciplinary action against them, the management uses communication channels to issue warnings.

Communication also helps in co-ordination of intra-organisational activities, inter-organisational transactions, business transactions, and commercial transactions by means of conferences, meetings, advertisements, requests, suggestions, reviews, and discussions. Without communication, coordinating the activities of different persons engaged in running a business is a remote possibility.

The management and the subordinates come closer through communication. Communication promotes cooperation and good industrial relations as it conveys feelings, ideas, opinions, and viewpoints of one party to the other party.

The policies and programs formulated by the organization to guide the workforce have to be conveyed to those who are responsible for the execution of work to achieve the organizational objectives. Only effective communication can translate the plans into actions. It aids teamwork by enabling people to work together. It helps perform basic management functions like instructing, coordinating, staffing, planning, etc.

Thus, these are the few important objectives of communication in the context of business organizations.

So far, we have discussed what comprises communication and the significance of communication in our personal, social as well professional life. We have also highlighted some of the fundamentals of communication. Let us now analyse the process of communication and see how it is accomplished.

1.7 PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

Process is a series of things done to achieve something. Communication also follows a process.

Communication begins when the sender/encoder identifies the need to communicate some idea/concept/information. He then encodes/formulates it into a message using a medium which can be understood by the receiver/decoder of the message who in turn processes it in his mind and responds to it. When the decoder understands the message completely, fidelity of communication is said to be 100% and the communication process is said to be complete. (Refer David Berlo’s Model of Communication) Thus, communication is a two-way process.

Fidelity of Communication

Idea Idea

Concept Encoder Medium Decoder Concept

Message Message

Information Information

Fidelity of Communication

David Berlo’s Model of Communication

If necessary, the receiver may send a reply or may respond or react to the message. This response or reaction is also known as feedback. But sometimes, there may be no response at all from the receiver even if it is required.

Absence of feedback can be attributed to either of the following reasons- a) the message does not reach the receiver or b) the receiver fails to understand the message. Such situations may arise due to the presence of some factor/s that can- a) obstruct the message from being transmitted or b) distort the meaning of the message.

The factors that hamper the flow of communication are known as ‘barriers’ to communication. (Refer Chapter 4 Resolving Barriers to Communication)

Communication occurs in five phases and it consists of the following eight components which are inter-related:

Idea

Sender/Encoder (Speaker/Writer)

Encoding

Message

Channel and Medium

Receiver/Decoder (Reader/Listener)

Decoding

Feedback

Let us now discuss in detail the various stages and elements involved in the communication process.

PHASE I- IDEATING:

1) Idea

Every message whether oral or written has its origin in an idea that germinates in the mind of the sender of the message.

Every idea refers to some context. Context is a common frame of reference within which the sender and the receiver communicate with each other.

Thus, the idea or information that the sender wants to convey to the receiver is the source of the message in the communication process.

2) Sender/Encoder

The person who initiates the communication process is referred to as the encoder. The process of communication begins with the sender who identifies the need to communicate. He may want to inform or to persuade or to influence or to make the receiver take a particular course of action.

The sender must have a clear picture in his mind about what he wants to communicate and should accordingly select symbols, words, images, etc. that would best convey his ideas to the receiver.

He must identify his audience and formulate the message in such a way that the receiver understands fully what he intends to convey and interprets it within the same context.

PHASE II- ENCODING:

3) Encoding

Encoding takes place when the sender formulates his idea into a message to be transmitted to the receiver, using a series of symbols- verbal and/or non-verbal, written or oral.

The sender should encode his message keeping in mind the purpose of communication and he should select words or symbols so as to make the receiver understand the communication correctly and to achieve the expected feedback.

The sender as well as the receiver should attach the same meaning to the symbols or words, otherwise communication would fail. Thus, proper encoding is essential for successful communication.

4) Message

That which is encoded, i.e. the idea/concept/information, is the message. Message is an idea transformed into words.

It can be expressed in different ways depending on the subject-matter, purpose, audience, personal style and cultural background of the sender.

It can be transmitted effectively only when it is well-formulated, clear, and complete in itself.

PHASE III- TRANSMITTING:

5) Channel and Medium

An appropriate medium chosen to send the message is known as channel. It is the vehicle which facilitates the sender to convey the message to the receiver.

Channel is the system used to transmit a message, whereas medium is one of the forms or types used under that system.

For example, oral communication is a channel and telephone conversation (a form of oral communication) is a medium.

There are three broad channels of communication and there are several media under each-

Channel Medium

1. Oral face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation,

audio-tapes, voice mail, etc.

2. Written letters, memos, reports, manuals, notices, circulars,

questionnaires, minutes, email, fax, etc.

3. Audio-visual cinema, television, video-tapes, video conferences,

video chat, etc.

Thus, there is a difference between medium and channel. The sender should decide the best possible channel and medium to transmit the message.

The selection of an appropriate channel/medium would be influenced by the following factors- a) the nature of the message, b) the urgency of the message, c) the number of receivers, d) the cost factor, and e) the relationship between the sender and the receiver.

PHASE IV- RECEIVING:

6) Receiver/Decoder

The person who receives the encoded message is referred to as the decoder. He is the intended audience of the message.

The receiver may be an individual or a group of individuals.