

# The 15 Cs of Effective Communication <sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In all facets of life, failing to communicate effectively destroys the entire plan. Similarly, in project and operational environments, some considerable failures stem from the lack of effective communication. While some fail to communicate at all, others fail to communicate effectively, and in the end, the result might be the same. In some instances, communicating ineffectively may be worse than not communicating at all. This paper aims to explain the role played by effective communication not only in project environments but in all settings where communication is required. The paper attempts to make the discussion on effective communication more interesting by explaining it from the 15Cs approach, where some thematic verbs, all starting with the letter C, are expanded, giving practical explanations on how they influence effective communication.

**Keywords:** Effective Communication; Stakeholder Engagement; Project Management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As in any other setting, including operational environments, effective communication plays a pivotal role in successful project management, and this is even confirmed by the Project Management Institute (PMI's) Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) Guide 6th Edition which incorporates Project Communications Management as one of the project management's ten knowledge areas. As another knowledge area, Project Stakeholder Management is highly supported by Project Communications Management since all stakeholders need to be constantly and properly communicated to. Thus, a clear communication management plan which addresses communication needs for all essential stakeholders needs to be in place. Among other things, the plan needs address what needs to be communicated, why it needs to be communicated, how it should be communicated (for instance, media), when should it be communicated, by whom the communication should be made and how often the communication should be made. This article delineates effective communication and gives a synopsis of the 15Cs that may need to be observed to ensure effective communication is made.

## 2. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication can undisputably be described as the cornerstone of successful interactions across various life facets ranging from business, education, healthcare, and interpersonal relationships, to mention but a few. Guffey and Loewy (2018) defines effective communication as the transmission of a message so that it is understood by the

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receiver just as intended by the sender. Effective communication does not only entail speaking or writing but includes listening, interpreting and providing feedback (confirmatory or corrective feedback). Also, Robbins and Judge (2019) explain effective communication as involving a two-way process in which information, knowledge, ideas, thoughts or beliefs are exchanged and equally understood by both parties. Including both verbal and non-verbal elements, effective communication is enhanced through clarity of expressions, use of appropriate tone, attentiveness, and timely feedback, among other enhancers. These elements are instrumental in the fabrication of a shared understanding.

Effective communication results when there is shared meaning, that is, when the message relayed, sent, encoded or transmitted by the speaker, writer or sender is received (decoded), understood and interpreted in the same way as the sender intended. This shared meaning requires a mutual understanding and the alignment of cognitive frameworks between the sender and receiver (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2018). If such an alignment lacks, communication may fail, resulting in misinterpretation, inefficiency, or conflict.

### **3. THE 15 Cs OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

This section briefly describes the 15Cs that can be used to gauge the effectiveness of communication. Communication is ubiquitous and it should be noted that the 15Cs are universally applicable to any environment. The 15Cs explained below are also applicable to any form of communication – be it oral communication, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, written communication and so on.

#### **3.1 Completeness**

Completeness in communication means that the sender ought to see to it that the message being relayed contains all material facts required by the receiver, listener or audience. The sender of the message must take into consideration the receiver's mindset and convey the message accordingly. A complete communication has the following, among other features:

- Complete communication develops and enhances reputation of an organization.
- Moreover, there are cost savings as no crucial information is missing, and no additional cost is incurred in conveying extra message if the communication is complete.
- A complete communication always gives additional information wherever required. It leaves no questions in the mind of receiver.
- Complete communication helps in better decision-making by the audience / readers / receivers of message as they get all desired and crucial information.
- It persuades the audience to listen and evaluate emphatically.

Information completeness can also be aided by making sure that the message addresses the 5 Ws.

### The 5 W's (the five questions method):

**Who?** – for instance, who did what, who is involved, who is needed, who is affected, who is targeted, etc.

**What?** – for instance, what happened, what is the issue, what needs to be done, etc.

**When?** – for instance, when something needs to be done, when something needs to be completed, when certain resources are needed, etc.

**Where?** – for instance, where something is found, where something took place, where an event shall take place, where a meeting shall be carried out, etc.

**Why?** – for instance, why something needs to be done, why something happened, why certain resources are needed, etc.

### 3.2 Correctness

Correctness or accuracy of any form of communication made matters much with regards to effective communication. At the core of correctness is proper grammar and spellings. However, the message must be perfect both grammatically and mechanically. As applied to business messages, correctness also means three characteristics; using the right level of language, checking the accuracy of figures, facts and words as well as maintaining acceptable writing mechanics.

Proper punctuation in written communication also plays a pivotal role in ensuring the correctness of any piece of communication. For instance, the correct meaning of a notice such as "SILENCE EXAMINATIONS IN PROGRESS" does not tell the reader to be silent because there are some examinations going on but one correct meaning would be to say the examinations that are on-going are about silence. "CROCODILES DO NOT SWIM HERE" is also misleading as the correct meaning is that the place may be free because crocodiles do not swim there although the writer's intention might be to warn the reader that they should not swim at the place of notice because there are crocodiles. Also refer to Box 1 below for an interesting anecdote about the power that punctuation has on communication.

#### **Box 1 – The Power of Punctuation**

An English professor asked his students to punctuate the following sentence:

*"A woman without her man is nothing."*

All of the males in the class wrote:

*"A woman, without her man, is nothing."*

All of the females in the class wrote:

*"A woman: without her, man is nothing."*

### **3.3 Clarity**

Effective communication involves conveying clear messages that are so simple and straightforward that the audience would require not much effort to extract the meaning. At all cost, a clear avoids ambiguity, confusion, or misinterpretation. This is achieved by making sure that the communicator pays close attention to the structure, tone, and language used in their messages. Some communication coaches use the “KISS” Principle to emphasize the need for communication clarity. Interpreted as either “Keep It Short and Simple” or “Keep It Simple, Stupid,” the principle underscores the importance of using straightforward, jargon-free language that makes communication easily processed and absorbed.

Clarity is particularly indispensable in project environments where stakeholders’ disciplines and backgrounds are diverse. Using technical terms without explanation, ambiguous references, or longwinded sentence structures can hinder understanding and endanger the smooth flow of information. To enhance clarity, communicators ought to define key terms, provide context where necessary, and structure their messages logically - often beginning with the main point and then substantiating it with finer details. Visual aids such as charts or bullet points can also help in disaggregating complex information into understandable versions. Overall, communication clarity cements collaboration, reduces errors, and fosters a shared understanding among project team members and all other stakeholders.

### **3.4 Concreteness**

Concreteness is also another essential component of effective communication. Concreteness is achieved when the message conveyed is specific rather than being general. In simple lexicon, it refers to the use of specific, precise, and tangible language that leaves little or no room for ambiguity. A concrete message is grounded in facts, figures, and clearly defined objectives, as opposed to vague generalisation. This enhances credibility and reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation or follow-up clarification. Precision is pertinent and helps in avoiding follow-up questions from the receiver or audience. For instance, the statement “*more human resources need to be hired soon for the project to be completed faster*” is far much different from “*30% more artisans need to be hired in three weeks so that the project is completed by 25 October as planned*”. The latter statement is more concrete as it includes more specifications which add value to the intended communication, leaving room for no or fewer follow-up questions.

To achieve optimal concreteness, communicators ought to put themselves into the shoes of their audience and anticipate the latter’s communication needs. getting into the shoes of the receiver requires continuously asking, “If I were receiving this message, what more would I need to know?” This question should keep popping up in the mind of the communicator until ideas are exhausted. By so doing, the conveyer of the message is almost, if not totally rest assured that the message is complete and concrete. In a project management context, concreteness fosters accountability, enhances decision-making,

and builds trust among stakeholders by showing that the communicator has clarity of thought and has considered operational realities. Ultimately, a concrete message inspires confidence and contributes to the overall effectiveness of the communication process in its entirety.

### **3.5 Conciseness**

Sometimes a piece of communication ought not to be packed with excessive words. As Polonius wisely said in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 2, Scene 2) that "brevity is the soul of wit," there is power in making a piece of communication concise and straight to the point. The saying demonstrates the value of being succinct, thus, communicating only what is necessary while avoiding redundancies. In project environments, where time and clarity are critically essential, concise communication ensures that messages are expeditiously and correctly understood by intended stakeholders. Excessively verbose messages can pollute the core message, reduce efficiency, and even irritate recipients who must paddle through unnecessary information to extract the real meaning.

Conciseness in communication necessitates deliberate effort. It involves stripping away trivial and dispensable details, avoiding deep language, and avoiding the temptation to show off one's linguistic ability at the expense of clarity. Verbose expressions and deep lexicon often act as semantic barriers, creating confusion rather than illumination. Instead, concise communicators focus on value addition: incorporating only appropriate material that aligns with the communication goal at hand and totally avoiding repetition unless it is intentional for emphasis. A concise message respects the time of the audience and maximizes the effectiveness of communication by openly letting the intended meaning come out with minimal distraction or misinterpretation.

### **3.6 Content**

What needs to be communicated (the content) should be well prepared, organized and appealing. The foundation of effective communication inevitably lies in the quality and organization of its content. Notwithstanding the fluency or confidence of the communicator, poorly prepared or disorganized content undermines the purpose of the message. The communicator must ensure that the content is relevant, accurate, and logically structured to guide the receiver through the message with ease. In professional and project environments, well-prepared content increases the likelihood of message retention, reduces confusion, and facilitates quicker decision-making.

The quality of content is, however, influenced by a multiplicity of factors, key among them being the communicator's level of expertise, understanding of the subject matter, and cognizance of the audience's informational needs. A communicator who is well-versed in the subject matter is more likely to deliver content that is both discerning and value-adding. Additionally, effective content needs to be aligned with the communication's objective: whether to inform, persuade, instruct, or motivate. The content ought to provide adequate background, evidence where necessary, and clearly indicate the desired outcome or call to action. Impactful content ensures that communication is not just heard or read, but also understood, trusted, and bears results (outputs, outcomes or impacts).

### **3.7 Credibility**

Credibility is the extent to which the communicator is perceived as trustworthy, reliable and authoritative. It plays an instrumental role in determining whether the message will be accepted, believed and acted upon by the recipient. Credibility is not achieved overnight but it is earned over time through consistent, honest, and value-driven communication. A communicator who has demonstrated integrity, competence, and accountability in past interactions is more likely to have their current message easily accepted. This means that credibility is inevitably a function of communicational goodwill - a form of reputational capital that magnifies communication effectiveness.

Credibility is influenced by a number of other factors, including some of the Cs such as competence, confidence and clarity. Credibility is earned through knowledge of the subject matter, communicating accurately and maintaining consistency in both the content and character. If previous communications were deceptive, dismissive or erroneous, they may jeopardize current credibility despite the quality of the current message. On the other hand, a solid track record of respectful and realistic exchanges builds a communicational reputation that can carry even difficult messages through difficult circumstances.

### **3.8 Consistency**

Consistency relates to the uniformity of the message, tone and delivery over time. It is a foundational pillar of credibility and reliability in communication. When the communicator consistently conveys messages that do not deviate from the previously communicated ideals, facts, values, beliefs and decisions, they buttress audience trust and minimize confusion. However, inconsistent communication can trigger uncertainty, skepticism as well as disengagement. In project environments, clarity and alignment are critical and consistency in communication helps teams stay focused, informed, and confident in the direction being taken.

Consistency is more than repetitive messaging. It includes congruent alignment of words and action. Divergences between words and what actually transpires can easily be noticed by stakeholders, and that seriously damage their faith in the leadership or value of a project. Regular communication establishes a cadence for expectations, mitigates the instances of misreading, and creates a stable environment where stakeholders are less likely to be shocked by sudden changes in messaging or decisions. Regardless of the level and nature of the project and even outside the project environment, consistency breeds reliability and is crucial for long-term collaboration and delivery on objectives.

### **3.9 Coherence**

Coherence is the logical development and internal consistency of a message. It guarantees that ideas to be conveyed are clearly structured and presented in a bid to allow the reader to properly connect them. A well-organized line of argument links one idea with the other appropriately, forming a logical chain, using appropriate linking



phrases and consistent jargon. In formal project management environments where complex information often needs to be communicated under time constraints, coherence is critical. Such coherence is instrumental in circumventing conflicts, eliminating confusion and ensuring that the key message being communicated is not polluted amidst diverse thoughts or fragmented arguments.

Communication that is incoherent is nasty, and it makes the audience turn off, to the extent that they may end up sabotaging the success of such communication endeavors. When ideas are thrown haphazardly or lack appropriate connectedness, the audience is highly likely to disengage, misinterpret the message, or miss key points. This results in the interruption of the smooth flow of communication and may compromise decision-making, collaboration as well as the timely execution of tasks. To achieve coherence, communicators ought to tactfully plan their messages, establish a logical sequence of points and ensure that ideas are logically arranged.

### **3.10 Courtesy**

Courtesy in communication (both written and verbal) is about expressing ideas in a respectful, considerate, and polite manner. It reflects emotional intelligence and a deep appreciation for the audience's dignity, views, and feelings. The message tone significantly influences how the message is received and interpreted. A courteous tone plays a pivotal role in reducing tension, promoting cooperation and fostering rapport, even under circumstances where the message being delivered is difficult or sensitive. It demonstrates that the communicator values not just the message, but also the recipient(s). This is eventually instrumental in fostering mutual respect and open dialogue.

Much can be accomplished if tact, diplomacy and appreciation of people are woven in messages that people communicate (Kaul, 2005). Courteous communication should not be mistaken with being excessively submissive or vague. It rather it requires striking a balance between being honest and empathetic. In project environments where teamwork, stakeholder engagement and conflict resolution are key, courtesy is critical in fostering healthy relationships and ensuring sustainable collaboration. Effortless habits such as using proper salutations, acknowledging others' contributions, avoiding blame, and responding selflessly can go a long way in significantly shaping how recipients perceive and act upon some communication. Overall, courtesy reinforces the human dimension of communication, which is essential for trust, morale and lasting success.

### **3.11 Competency**

Competence is the quality or state of having sufficient knowledge, skill, experience, judgement and cognitive strength needed to effectively deliver a particular message. A competent communicator is well-informed, articulate, and able to structure ideas clearly and persuasively. Competency not only reinforces the content of the message but also augments the communicator's credibility and trustworthiness. It nurtures a sense of assurance in both the sender and the receiver, creating necessary conditions for influential dialogue and mutual understanding. In professional environments like project

management, demonstrating subject-matter competence is critical, as it allows the communicator to anticipate questions, clarify technical points, and offer practical solutions.

Competence gives the communicator some confidence and this affects communication positively. Effective competence is a product of thorough planning, preparation and research. This would manifest in accurate information, and a well-organized delivery. Effective communicators avoid reliance on assumptions or unsupported opinions; they invest time in research, planning, and fact-checking to ensure that their communication is relevant, evidence-based, and aligned with the audience's expectations. Whether delivering a project update, responding to stakeholder concerns, or resolving conflicts within a team, a communicator's competence is the foundation from which respect, influence, and successful outcomes stem.

### **3.12 Confidence**

Confidence is the communicator's trust in their abilities, qualities and judgements. Despite the communicator's competence, expertise and good understanding of the content to be communicated, lack of confidence may be detrimental to effective communication. Confidence manifests itself in the quality of tone, posture, choice of words as well as in the style of delivery, among other indicators. Often, confidence shapes the audience's perception even before the actual message is fully processed. Speaking with confidence displays the communicator's credibility, competence, and authority, all of which influence the audience's trust and engagement. All things being equal, a communicator saturated with confidence is highly likely to hold attention, command respect, and influence outcomes, particularly in professional environments including project management meetings, stakeholder briefings, or team negotiations.

However, confidence alone, without being complemented and supplemented by other Cs, is not sufficient. Confidence without preparation or accuracy can be tantamount to detrimental arrogance or overconfidence. Even the most technically sound message can fail to land if the speaker appears unsure, hesitant, or withdrawn. Confidence should therefore be supported with knowledge, emotional intelligence, and professional respect for the audience. It must be in sync with other key communication principles such as clarity, conciseness, and courtesy. This ensures that the message is not only heard but believed and acted upon. In this way, confidence serves the purpose of a catalytic agent and a complement to effective communication.

### **3.13 Creativeness**

In effective communication, creativity entails the communicator's ability to convey messages in an appealing, inventive, and convincing manner. This is particularly useful when the goal is to persuade, influence or inspire action. A creative communicator always crafts neoteric and novel ways to structure messages, uses rich examples or relatable analogies, and adapts delivery to suit the audience's interests and attention span. Such creativeness does not only make the message more striking but also helps decompose intricate ideas into digestible and relatable content. Whether delivering a project update,



pitching a proposal, or resolving conflict, creativity adds life to the message and keeps the audience engaged.

Despite the value that creativity adds to effective communication, it should not be viewed as a substitute for integrity. Persuasive communication must not deviate from the truth, ethics and factual accuracy. Ethical communication should align with transparency and accountability, meaning that the communicator should not twist or misrepresent information in a bid to win an argument or please the audience. When clad with honesty, creativity can transform communication from a mechanical exchange of information into a broader interaction that creates a sustainable relationship with the audience.

### **3.14 Controlled**

Communicating without being controlled is wasteful because the communicator cannot achieve the intended communication objectives. Being controlled entails maintaining composure, managing emotions and responding considerately rather than reactively. A controlled communicator keeps its cool, refrains from emotionally charged outbursts and continues to transmit the message in a clear, professional manner even when things get irritable or the recipient is obstinate. Control is more like a type of self-governance that keeps the message on point and creates a climate that invites respectful and meaningful dialogue. In environments with challenging opinions, stress, and tight deadlines, emotional control is instrumental in avoiding misunderstandings and conflicts.

Control also means being able to lead the conversation on purpose: knowing when to talk, when to listen, and how to keep the dialogue moving productively. This means being mindful of what one's utterances, maintaining control over one's non-verbal communication and fighting the temptation to hijack or manipulate the conversation. The ability to keep controlled can be classified as wisdom and earns the communicator some trust, respect and credibility.

### **3.15 Consideration**

Effective communication is not only about having a message transmitted but requires taking into account a plethora of factors that affect the entire communication environment. An effective communicator would consider their own intention, the audience's expectations and general circumstances surrounding the communication. An effective communicator would also take time to understand the audience's background, emotional state, education level, values and cultural beliefs. Understanding all these factors will make sure that the message is properly packaged, tailored and customized to suit the specific recipients. Emotional intelligence equally plays a pivotal role in effective communication. The communicator's ability to empathize, read non-verbal cues and adapt the communication style in response to the audience's needs enhances both clarity and acceptability.

Consideration also includes exercising compassion and judgment in deciding what, when and how to convey a message. Not every moment is appropriate for communication and

not every platform is the right channel. Under circumstances where the communication atmosphere is emotionally tense or the audience is not in a good state, delaying communication (or adjusting its tone and content) can be more effective than forcing it. Flexibility, empathy, and the ability to strike a balance between urgency and appropriateness all contribute to effective communication.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In a project management environment, in various work-related phenomena, at home, at church and anywhere where communication is inevitable, observing some or all of the 15Cs can be a good audit tool to ascertain the effectiveness of communication made or being made. However, although comprehensive, the 15Cs are just a mnemonic and therefore not exhaustive. All in all, an eclectic approach to communication should be used so that every small aspect or tool of communication is exploited in order to achieve high effectiveness. Communication should be well thought and planned for. Communicating after planning and considerable level of preparation achieves the intended communication goals better than impromptu communication.

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Tasiyana has experience in both the private and public sectors in Zimbabwe. He currently serves as a Talent and Organisational Development Specialist (Domestic Taxes) at the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA). In this role, he has been instrumental in economic research, talent management, capacity building, and the overall management of the training cycle. A passionate researcher, his professional interests lie in Public Economics, Project Management, and Taxation.

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