



Communication is complex and challenging. Most people think they're good at it. Few are. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

Why is Communication So *ing Hard?

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Near the end of the 20th Century, a Finnish academic, author, and member of parliament named Osmo Antero Wiio observed the

difficulties surrounding human communication in his book "Wiio's laws - and some others." He humorously concluded, "Communications usually fail except by

accident” (Wiio, 1978). While this observation may inspire humor or cynicism, it highlights all leaders’ frustration when communicating. (Please note that “all” is intentional, not an overgeneralization.)

Communication is one of the most challenging tasks leaders must execute, and people tend not to be particularly good at it. (Don’t believe it? Ask yourself how good your boss is at communicating with you.) Thus, all leaders must improve their communication skills and organizational communication process. Doing so requires considering the fundamentals of human communication outlined by Wiio.

“Communication usually fails, except by accident.”

Similar to Murphy’s law (which suggests what can go wrong, will), Wiio’s law states that if communication can fail, it will. Several factors complicate communication in the Army, including population diversity, variety of technical backgrounds, and overuse of acronyms.

Leaders must accept messages will not be received as intended and must actively take steps to mitigate their inevitable failure. Organizational communication isn’t an endeavor doomed to failure, however. If leaders consider as many friction points as possible before communicating, they improve their chances of successful communication.

Wiio’s tenet also suggests that if one is content with a message, it will fail – or if it’s successful, it’s only so by accident. While this may sound tongue-in-cheek, it’s almost always true. Messages or ideas for communication are incomplete even after they’re delivered.

Those in leadership positions must consistently refine organizational themes and messages, considering

possible interpretations and repeating by a factor of 10. Hence, they should include key themes to the point of redundancy at every possible opportunity.

One example might be adding a “who we are, what we do, and how we do it” slide at the beginning of every training meeting. It’s repetitive, but it’ll sink in.

“If a message can be interpreted in several ways, it will be interpreted in a manner that maximizes the damage.”

As senior enlisted leaders in the Army, we experience this when addressing large groups of Soldiers. Inevitably, a few will read your language and hear insulting messages rather than simple statements.

For example, if we said, “As a unit, we need to focus on improving our fitness,” some would consider this a statement of fact. Yet, others will believe it is a direct insult intended to highlight their weakness or leadership’s displeasure in the unit.

While the intent is likely benign, a chance for misinterpretation exists. Considering this ahead of time, leaders might choose their words more carefully and say, “My goal is to have a unit Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT) average of 480.” This second statement is more specific and reduces potential damaging interpretations. Words have meaning, so be exact in what you say.

“There is always someone who knows better than you what you meant with your message.”

Once people get comfortable with you, they quit listening and start implying. While this might not be conscious behavior, we all do it, which wrecks our communication processes. One of the main reasons for

this problem is the illocutionary force theory, which suggests different people interpret words differently and factors such as people’s organization, background, and culture influence their interpretation (Nordquist, 2020).

Consider reactions to the directive to “conduct police call.” Those not in the Army may phone the authorities, whereas those in the military will begin to pick up trash. This simple example highlights how the same words can be interpreted differently. To mitigate this, leaders can ask those with whom they communicate to repeat the message in their own words.

Army Regulation 600-22 describes this underused process as active listening (Department of the Army, 2019a). It can be tedious and sometimes time-consuming, but it works..

“The more we communicate, the worse communication succeeds.”



Lt. Gen. Charles D. Luckey, Chief of the Army Reserve and Commanding General, speaks with Army Reserve Soldiers at Fort McCoy, Wis., July 30, 2019. When preparing their messages, leaders must consider their message will not be received as intended and actively take steps to mitigate its inevitable failure. (U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Felix R. Fimbres)

While this may be true in Wii's law, it's only accurate when people communicate conflicting information or share interpretations of messages rather than the messages themselves.

We can't count the times we've been told to do something because "the commander wants it done." Yet, it turns out the commander never uttered those words – or asked the opposite. Wii suggests people communicate the wrong message more often than the intended one.

In many cases, someone relays the intended message exactly. Still, its meaning changed because it was taken out of context. Overcommunication is generally good if the messages are correct. To overcome this problem, leaders should consider the mission command principle of developing a shared understanding outlined in ADP 6-0 (Department of the Army, 2019b).

"The more we communicate, the faster misunderstandings propagate."

"One of the biggest problems with this unit is communication." How often have we heard this statement in surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations?

Everyone believes they're great communicators and everyone else isn't. Here lies the crux of most communication problems. Good communication, like leadership, is in the eye of the beholder. Leaders fight this issue by sending the same message to different people, but issues occur when people interpret it differently.

Consider the many ways listeners may interpret recommendations from organizational leaders. For example, suppose a first sergeant tells his formation he "recommends" personnel bring their Army Physical Fitness Uniform (APFU) jackets to physical training (PT) the following day. How might that statement be interpreted and further communicated by platoon sergeants?

Often, when leaders communicate recommendations to large audiences, those recommendations become assignments. However, maybe leaders don't intend their recommendations to become tasks, they merely attempted to share their perspectives or offer options.

People also use different words to say the same thing. They often have slightly different meanings than the original words. It's like the telephone game, where a message passes through 20 people – and its final form bears little resemblance to the original.

The more information you communicate, the more opportunities for misunderstanding. To address this, leaders must communicate clear and consistent messages and use active listening. Oh, and if you're the most senior person, don't "recommend" unless you want it done.



During a Building Strong and Ready Teams event, Soldiers learned about building effective communication and practiced active listening, validation, and showing empathy. Active listening can be time-consuming, but it is an effective way to communicate and combat misunderstandings. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Crystal Harlow)

"In mass-communication, the important thing is not how things are, but how they seem to be."

Leaders must remember most communication is nonverbal (Lunenburg, 2010). Even if they relay a message 20 times using the same language, receivers will take in additional information from the senders and the environment to determine its meaning.

So, nonverbal communication accompanying a message can twist its meaning. For example, a first sergeant who says, "I always have an open door," but then yells at Soldiers who take him at his word. The message is, he doesn't have an open door. Leaders must ensure their audio matches their video.

"The importance of a news item is inversely proportional to the square of the distance."

According to an adage, the first report is always wrong. Wii suggests important messages won't travel far, yet unimportant messages will. In today's digital age, communication speed often outpaces the message.

To compound the issue, most Soldiers are incredibly proficient with digital technology and can communicate misunderstandings faster than the intended message. If you want to see how quickly this works, tell a Soldier tomorrow's PT might be canceled, but if not, the PT uniform has changed, then walk to the motor pool and ask a random Soldier what the uniform is for PT. The Soldier will mostly likely answer ... "PT's canceled."

Units can resolve this issue by using well-defined Primary, Alternate, Contingency, and Emergency (PACE) plans. They can tailor these plans depending on how commanders want to receive information, but

everyone should use them once established.

Another critical point is that if leaders communicate messages in different PACE plan modalities, they must ensure they're the same in all formats. In other words, Facebook, Outlook, the formation, and the phone calls must all be the same. *PT isn't canceled.*

“The more important the situation is, the more probable you had forgotten an essential thing that you remembered a moment ago.”

You must admit this last tenet is funny, but only because we've all lived through it. Interestingly, it usually happens when we address people in very senior positions. We know what we want to say; we simply get nervous and forget parts of it, which, of course, we remember about two minutes after it's too late.

The same thing happens in emails. We could collectively bet a month's pay everyone reading this article sent an email they had to recall (or had to send a

follow-up message with additional information).

An excellent tool for remembering important message aspects is to borrow a best practice from the aviation branch and make a simple checklist of what you need to communicate. This solution sounds simple, but checklists work if you use them.

Another potential tool is asking someone to proofread your email before hitting send. When command teams proofread each other's written communication, they establish a system that helps ensure consistent and thorough messaging.

Conclusion

Communication is complex and challenging. Most people think they're good at it. Few are. However, leaders can combat communication issues within their formations by understanding the ideas behind Wiio's funny law. While communication may never be perfect, it can always be better. ■

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