

Levels of communication

Supporting effective communication

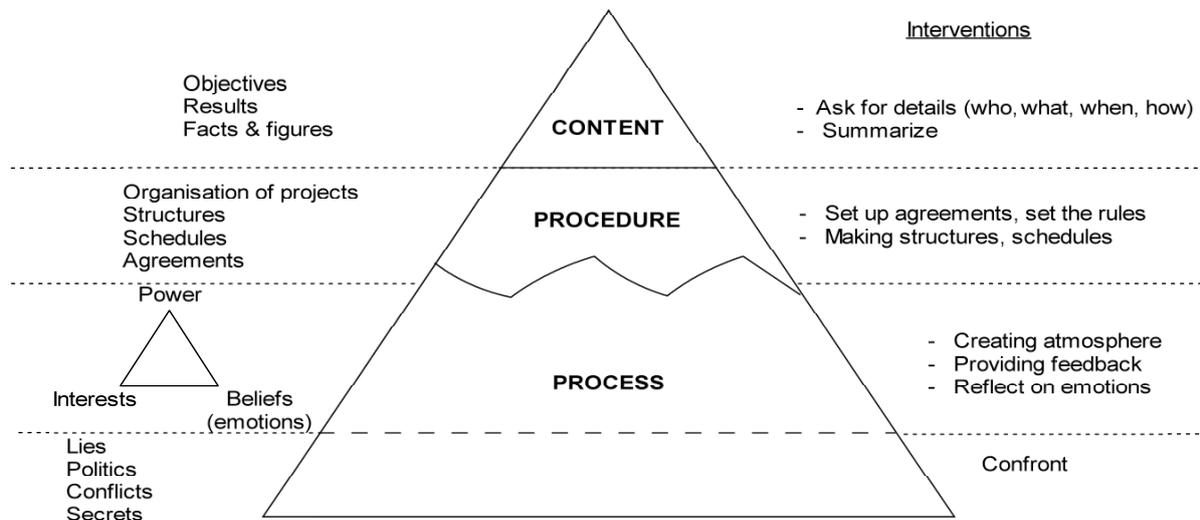
Managers and facilitators play an important role in supporting (complex) communication-processes. A very effective way to support communication processes is by placing conscious and targeted interventions. Placing interventions can lead to a better understanding of each other's opinions in group interactions. They can speed up meetings and group-activities and they can also make them much more efficient.

Three levels of communication

To support the communication-process in a good way it is important to distinguish three levels (or layers) of communication:

1. The content of what someone is saying;
2. The procedure of what someone is saying (or the way someone is saying what he says);
3. The process of the relations between the speaker and the listeners and also the emotions that arise during the conversation.

These three levels always exist at the same moment when communication takes place. In theory, we set them apart to understand the communication-process. A facilitator chooses the level on which he would like to intervene.



The figure above illustrates the levels of communications in a pyramid-form. The level of process is the lowest level of the pyramid. Process is the fundament of communication. Without good process there is no effective procedure. Without a good process and a clear procedure, the quality of the content will be very low. Therefore, emotion will also dominate over rationality, if you like it or not. Process is always followed up by content.

In the next paragraphs we will discuss some interventions, related to the three levels of communication.

Content

An intervention on the first level, the level of content, is targeted at the content of what is being told. It is about the topic of the conversation. Questions in this level are about the *who*, the *what*, the *when* or the *how* of what someone is saying. For example: 'who are the members of this board?', and 'what do facilitating skills mean in the context of *learning to change*?'. An example of facts: 'what are the results of this month?'

Another very effective intervention on the first level is to summarize. Almost everyone likes to hear back the essence of what he has said by a listener – it is a sign that one has been understood. After that, you can move to the next question (to discover more about what someone thinks), or the next topic (procedure). For a good facilitator, summarizing is one of the most frequently used interventions in supporting the communication of a group.

Procedure

Using an intervention on the level of procedure, level 2, means that you are reacting *to the way* something is being told, followed up by a question, a proposal or an agreement. This level represents clear and broad-carried schedules, or certain communication-structures. For example: 'I perceive that you only talk about the resistance that arises with the cost-reduction. Personally, I would also like to exchange thoughts about the chances of realising our efficiency-objectives. *My proposal would be that everyone gives his opinion on this briefly, as a closure to this topic.*' The last sentence (in italics) of this example is a proposal of procedure.

Process

The third level, the process-level, is most difficult. Many elements in communication are difficult to see or even invisible. Non-verbal signals help us understand why someone says certain things. Also, the tone of voice or the speed (half-verbal signals) of communication does say a lot about what someone actually means by his communication. Research points out that eighty percent of our messages are non-verbal (!). Closely observing and listening provides a lot of information about the process. What does actually happen on this level? Let us look at four categories:

- *Opinion*

We distinguish three kinds of opinions:

1. Giving your *view* on an issue or an idea.
2. Judging *something*: an opinion can transform into a judgement. For example: 'I think this method is not a good method', or 'I agree with you. This is the only good decision to take.'
3. Judging *someone*: this kind of opinion does not focus on an issue or object (for example: a proposal), but on a person. For example: 'he is a good guy', or 'I have never seen something good out of his hands. He is not competent in what he is doing.'

- *Emotions*

Emotions arise because of certain thoughts about a situation. They are being caused by beliefs or opinions. Examples of emotions are: fear, anger, sorrow and happiness. Emotions are not very difficult to recognise because they typically touch deeply. For example: fury, crying, laughing. Emotions could also be disguised by cynicism, sarcasm or humour. Emotions cause physical, chemical reactions in your head that make you very selective in listening.

- *Power*

One of the less explored and understood elements of the level of process is power. Someone could have power because of status, expertise, experience, authority of decision making, having an distinct network, gender, age, access to information, hierarchical position and so on. We distinguish power (authority) and influence (expertise). Power is in the hands of the person who decides (for example managers). Influence is being taken by people who are not allowed to take decisions (for example: staff-members).

When you intervene on the level of process, you aim to make the emotions, opinions or the power visible which is shown by the person in charge. Only in this way can they become an explicit part of the communication and can you actually deal with them, when they disturb moving forward on the content. These interventions are also labelled as reflections. A reflection is an abstraction of, for example, an emotion or an opinion. When you reflect, you have to listen very well to the things that are being said between the lines. The essence of what someone is arguing is often kept by the combination of tone of voice, speed and attitude (half-verbal signals), and not by the spoken words. We give three examples of reflections on the three categories:

- Opinion: 'you think that we can not go on any longer, because of the delays';
- Emotion: 'you are very happy that you finally got rid of him';
- Authority: 'actually you already made your decision (power on the base of position), 'I understand that we have to trust in your expertise' (power on the base of expertise).

IMPORTANT

To realise any contact on the level of process, YOU NEVER ASK ANY QUESTIONS! Asking questions leads to the level of content. You only give a short description of what you (think you) see or hear.

A second taboo: the why-question. Our advice would be to ask why-questions as little as possible. Why-questions always lead to defensive strategies of your partner in conversation. People will start to explain. When you want to know why someone is doing something, you could get that information by two other ways. The first way is to ask: 'what made you do this?'. The second way is to let someone verify your assumptions: 'I understand that you find it difficult to make a decision on this point?'

The only way to get competent in intervening is to practise; again, again and again.