

# DON'T MISCONSTRUE COMMUNICATION CUES

## Understanding MISCUES can help reduce widespread and expensive miscommunication.

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How much is effective communication worth? In monetary terms, \$5 million to \$10 million annually for communication training for employees. That's just among *Fortune* 200 companies, according to a survey we conducted. Of course, that doesn't count the costs of miscommunication, which are exponentially higher and can't be directly calculated.

Consider the following:

◆ In testimony following the ill-fated space shuttle Challenger explosion in 1986, Rocco Petrone, the president of the former Rockwell International Corp., said he told Rockwell officials in Florida—including his assistant, Robert Glaysher—hours before the launch that he was disturbed by record cold temperatures at the launch site and felt it wasn't safe to launch. But Glaysher simply indicated to NASA Shuttle Director Arnold Aldrich that Rockwell would not assure that it was safe to fly. Aldrich later said he thought Rockwell officials were concerned about the cold temperature but they did not intend to ask him not to launch. Apparently, Petrone *did intend* for his message to be interpreted to mean that the space shuttle shouldn't be launched on schedule. Aldrich interpreted Glaysher's more tentative message to mean that, although concerned, Rockwell supported a launch of the space shuttle on schedule.

◆ Ferrari, the automaker, sent a memo to its automobile dealers in the U.S., instructing them to “monitor” cars that are privately imported into the U.S. to make sure the company was in compliance with U.S. laws, according to a report in *Auto Week*. Some dealers interpreted the memo to mean that they should intrusively inspect, and in some cases partially disassemble, certain Ferraris brought in for service to verify point-by-point compliance with a list of U.S. requirements. But by “monitor,” the company meant only to inform its U.S. dealers that some privately imported Ferraris might not be in compliance and for the dealers to notify the company if they had noticed this problem.

◆ The U.S. Army bought 461,000 helmets from the Gentex Corporation, then told the company the helmets were unacceptable, according to a *Wall Street Journal* article. The helmets were to be manufactured with layers of Kevlar material. Apparently, the Army interpreted *layer* to be a solid sheet of material. The manufacturer interpreted *layer* to also include small scrap sheets of the material stitched together. As a result, the helmets were manufactured using layers of patchwork Kevlar material, and the Army declared the helmets to be defective.

## A PYRAMID OF GUIDANCE

To help you avoid these and other types of communication problems, we've developed a communication “pyramid,” dubbed MISCUES, shown in Figure 1. This acronym stands for meaning, inferences, stereotyping, clarity, understanding, experience, and selective perception.

Essentially, ideal interactions lead to shared meanings.

But however technically proficient financial professionals are, skillful use of MISCUES can mean the difference between success and failure of vital job-performance activities, including customer relations and employee interaction. It can also translate into better comprehension of company goals, create a positive workplace environment, and improve job satisfaction.

Let's now take a look at each component of MISCUES.

## Meaning

The concept of meaning is critical to effective communication. In fact, you can't have communication without meaning. Yet the notion that words have meaning is a myth. People will often look up a word in a dictionary to see what it means, but the dictionary doesn't give a meaning of a word; it typically gives definitions and often common usage. So rather than words having meaning, we give words meaning. For example, the meaning of “goodwill” to one person is benevolence of a company; to another it's the behavior of an exceptional employee; to a third person it's the excess value of a business over the book value of its net assets. Therefore, the word “goodwill” has no meaning in and of itself. Instead, we give the word meaning—the meaning that makes sense to us.

The myth that words inherently have meaning leads people to think that what they've said is heard and understood. You can send verbal messages, but you can't send meaning. Likewise, you can receive verbal messages, but you can't receive meaning. So, as we point out in our pyramid, it's important that you select words that are likely to have the same meaning to the person you're communicating with.

## Inferences

Making inferences is a common cause of miscommunication in organizations. An inference can be defined as the act or process of drawing a conclusion about something unknown based on facts or indications. Unlike a fact, which can be proven to be true, an inference is a guess that seems correct. The act of inferring works as follows: A person gains information, perhaps by observing something, hearing comments from others, or reading certain material. Then the person analyzes the information and makes an educated guess from it. The conclusion or inference that results may be correct or incorrect. The inferences you make while interacting with others on the job can lead you to incorrect interpretations. When we don't realize we've made an inference, especially on important issues, and think it's a fact, miscommunication

can result. You can't get through life without making inferences, and there's nothing wrong with making them. But people in organizations expect that you don't present your inferences as facts.

## Stereotyping

A stereotype is a generalized perception of what a group of individuals is like. Stereotyping occurs when a conclusion is drawn that an individual member of a group has all or most of the perceived characteristics of the group. If asked, most people will say that it's generally not a good idea to stereotype. Yet these same people, if they are honest, will probably admit that they do stereotype people. But why? Mostly it's because it's a lot easier to stereotype than to actually take the time to really know a person, and therein lies a reason for miscommunication. We may misinterpret that person's behaviors and comments. Therefore, the same statement with the same intent made by two different individuals may be interpreted in opposite ways.

## Clarity

Miscommunication often results when messages

are unclear or ambiguous, both verbally and nonverbally. A statement as simple as, "We need that financial analysis soon," isn't entirely clear. How soon is "soon?" By "soon," do you mean "before five o'clock today," "before noon tomorrow," "before the end of the week?" Your intent by using the word "soon" is unclear. A client who nods his or her head to imply understanding may be misinterpreted as showing agreement.

Just because something is clear to us doesn't mean it's clear to others. You may have a certain understanding of an issue that others around you don't have. As a result, they can't appreciate what's involved with the issue the way you can. For example, jargon among people with similar specialized training or experience may be accurately interpreted. But someone outside that specialization probably won't understand the jargon because it's specialized language.

Moreover, when we use words or send messages that are vague or abstract, we set ourselves up for miscommunication. Instead, we should create messages that are likely to be interpreted by our target receiver or audience as we intend the messages to be interpreted.

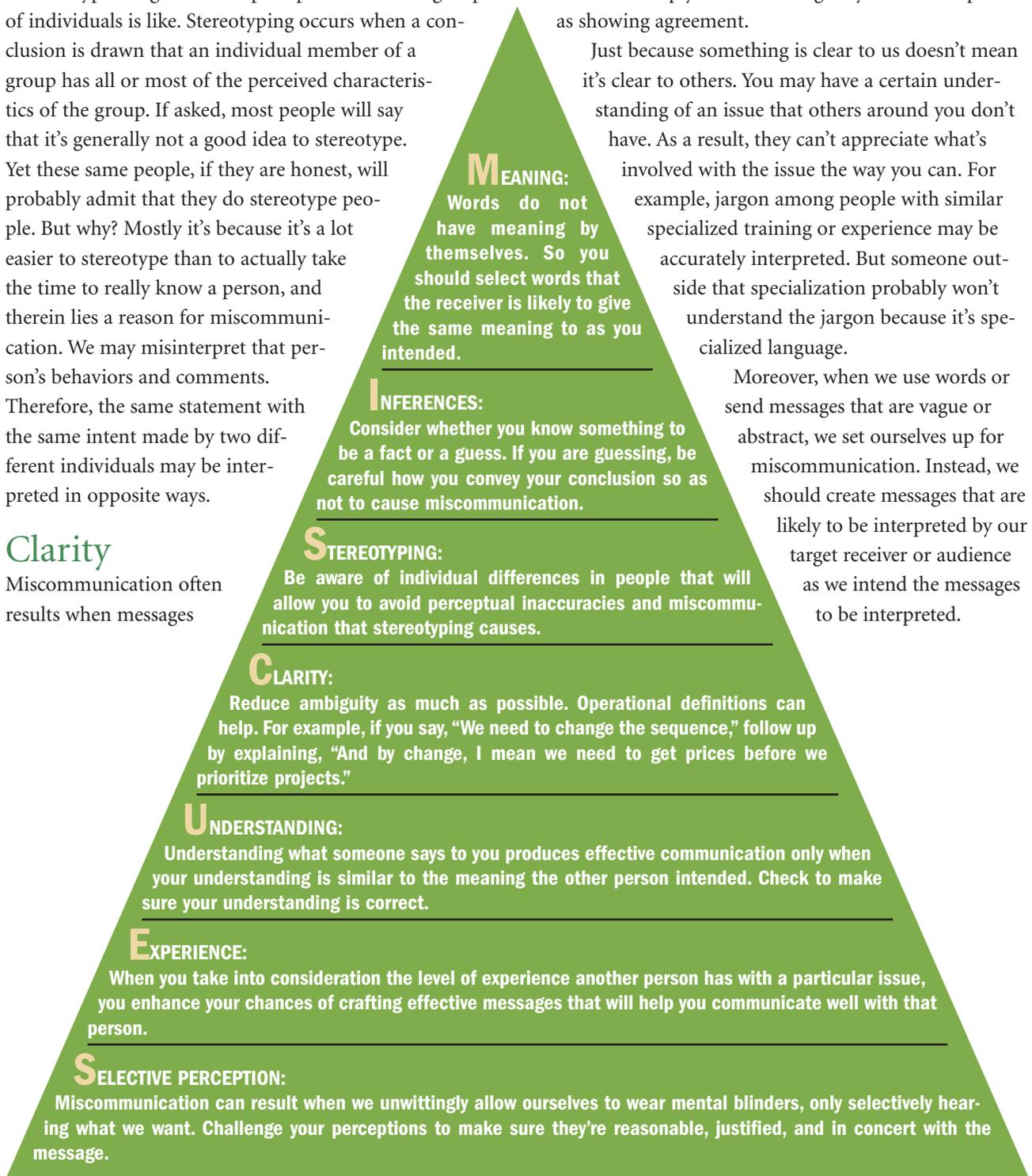


Figure 1: Elements of MISCUES

## Understanding

Many people think that understanding implies effective communication.

Unfortunately, this view can cause problems. For instance, Beth, a supervisor, writes a business letter, gives it to Carol, her secretary, and asks, "Please type this letter and mail two copies of it to Ms. Liz Jones and Ms. Alice Smith." Suppose you then ask Carol if she understands Beth's request, and Carol replies, "Yes." Next, you ask Carol to summarize how she plans to fulfill Beth's request and Carol says, "I am going to type this handwritten letter Beth gave me and use first-class postage to mail one copy of the letter to Ms. Jones and one copy to Ms. Smith." It sounds like everything is fine at this point, but there could be miscommunication between Carol and Beth even though Carol understands Beth's request. As Beth gave her instructions to Carol, suppose she meant two copies to Liz and two copies to Alice. In this case, miscommunication has occurred. Regardless of whether or not Beth was at fault in the way she gave her instructions, miscommunication occurred even though Carol indicated that she understood Beth's request.

## Experience

What do the words "interpretation," "understanding," and "impression" have in common? They all refer to the meaning we attach to them. When we interpret language, we are giving meaning to the words we hear. Our understanding of events around us is representative of the meaning we give to those events. Our impression of how someone feels when he or she acts a certain way is the result of the meaning we give to their actions.

How do we go about giving meaning to words, events, or actions? It's based on our life experiences. Financial consultants who've had a negative experience participating in appraisal interviews, for example, will likely give a negative meaning to appraisal interviews. On the other hand, those who've had a positive experience with appraisal interviews will probably give a positive meaning to them. Therefore, skilled communicators take into consideration the experiences individuals have had when they attempt to communicate with them.

## Selective Perception

As we interact with others on the job, we're exposed to many messages, both verbal and nonverbal. As a matter of fact, we're exposed to so many messages and receive so

much information that we must select what we'll focus on to avoid being overwhelmed. This process of focusing on some details while neglecting others results in selective perception. Our needs, interests, expectations, and experiences all interact to influence what we choose to perceive. Unlike film in a camera that records everything in the picture, your

brain doesn't necessarily process everything you see or observe. Just as people differ in appearance, they frequently differ in the way they view the world and what goes on around them. If a company announces layoffs, not everyone in the organization will perceive the message in the same way. Employees with secure jobs may focus on the impact that the announcement will have on their department's expansion plans. Employees whose jobs are in jeopardy will likely focus on the announcement's effect on their personal financial security. Miscommunication can occur as a result of differing perceptions. Therefore, it's wise to be aware of how perceptions may differ as you interact with others.

## AVOIDING MISCOMMUNICATION

Financial professionals will often spend 10 hours a week resolving miscommunication problems. But there are multiple ways to avoid miscommunication. We offer you the following.

### 1. Be aware of inferences.

To keep your important inferences from causing communication problems, you should be aware when you're making them and understand they're not facts. When you're alert to important inferences, you can isolate and examine them and, as a result, be less likely to treat them as facts.

### 2. Label your important inferences.

When you label your inferences, you let the other person know what you're inferring. As a result, the other person can tell you if your inferences are correct or incorrect. For example, an inference could be labeled by saying, "I'm inferring that your price quote is still good even though we have been delayed in placing our order." If your inference is incorrect, the miscommunication can be identified quickly.

### 3. Consider the person with whom you are communicating.

When interpreting other people's messages, consider what

they mean by the words they use. That is, don't focus solely on what is said. Consider the other person's perceptions or experiences and how he or she uses different words. Also, when you send a message to others, think about how they'll interpret your words.

#### 4. Ask questions.

Sometimes job-related messages are vague. If you're confused by what someone says or you realize that more than one interpretation could be plausible, ask a question to clarify. A manager, for example, may be told by a subordinate that the company's delivery truck will need to be repaired soon. Instead of guessing what the subordinate means, it would be appropriate for the manager to ask what repairs are needed and by what date they should be made.

#### 5. Paraphrase important statements.

When you paraphrase, you restate in your own words what another person has said. The sender of the message, after hearing it paraphrased, can point out whether the message has been interpreted correctly. Paraphrasing key points in a conversation helps clarify what has been agreed on or discussed. By using this technique, therefore, miscommunication and its consequences can be reduced greatly or avoided altogether.

#### 6. Make the message specific.

Miscommunication can also occur as a result of differing perceptions. Our backgrounds and past experiences often influence our perceptions. When communicating with others on the job, you need to be sensitive to their perceptions. Failure to do so just invites miscommunication, especially when messages are vague or incomplete. Avoid these problems by making sure that your messages are unambiguous and clear to the other person.

#### 7. Clarify important points.

Don't take it for granted that the important points in your messages will be interpreted correctly. Instead, identify the important points and clarify the meaning you intend.

#### 8. Seek feedback.

When it's critical that the message be interpreted correctly, ask for feedback. If others are inexperienced with the topic you're discussing, there's a reasonable possibility that they may misinterpret your statements. Therefore, seek feedback. For example, if you assign interns in your office to compile data, before they begin the task, ask them to tell you what sources they'll use.

#### 9. Be aware of your body language.

Nonverbal actions can speak louder than words. In fact, facial expressions, eye movements, and gestures send messages that are often just as communicative as the words we speak. Generally, people believe that our body language accurately reflects our attitudes and feelings, regardless of what we may say. Therefore, make sure your body language doesn't contradict your oral messages. For example, if you're pleased with a new assignment, appear pleased. A frown may lead others to conclude that you're actually dissatisfied with the new assignment.

#### 10. Listen attentively.

Good listeners are universally admired. In addition, you'll be better informed and find it easier to function effectively on the job by practicing effective listening skills. Hearing what others say, however, is not the same as listening. To listen, you must concentrate on what is said and give meaning to the verbal message. By listening attentively on the job, you analyze the speaker's statements and determine how the information can aid in your work.

### SHARED MEANING

Miscommunication leads to mistakes and is costly, sometimes disastrously. No business is immune from it. But that doesn't mean it can't be minimized. Learning MISCUES, avoiding their inherent problems, and practicing their advice is a good start.

By understanding and using the elements of MISCUES appropriately, managers of Rockwell, Ferrari, and the Army might have avoided awful mistakes.

You can, too. By simply striving for shared meaning in your communication, you'll inevitably boost your effectiveness and the performance of everyone you deal with. ■

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