

Climbing the Heights of Communication

BY SAAHIL MEHTA

What happens when communication goes wrong?

Poor communication can cause you to lose time, relationships, well-being, or a lot of money. According to consultant David Grossman in his 2011 Holmes Report article "The Cost of Poor Communications," the total estimated cost of employee misunderstanding was \$37 billion in companies with 100,000 employees in a survey of 400 U.S. and U.K. corporations. This cost included actions or errors of omission by employees who had misunderstood or were misinformed about company policies, business processes, job function or a combination of the three. Misunderstanding cost each company an average of \$62.4 million per year.

What if it cost you your life? Mountaineers like myself take communication very seriously. We are at the mercy of the forces of nature, and poor communication can cause a serious injury if not death. Back in December 2010, my wife and I were climbing to the top of Kala Patthar in Nepal at 5,545 meters above sea level. Because it was off-season, we met the same small group of people every day, allowing us to get acquainted with one another. One afternoon, one of the climbers was not in sight, so I asked my lead guide about his whereabouts only to find out that he had passed away due to altitude sickness. I was shocked. How did this happen? Questions started running around in my head. What if the guide had communicated better by checking in with the climber more regularly? What if the climber had communicated better about his physiology? What if...? The point is, the reasons could be endless, but the loss of life could have been avoided through better communication.

What if we could communicate in our day-to-day lives like we do on mountains, as if our life depended on it? We could save a lot of pain and scale our summits of success faster.

WAYS OF COMMUNICATING

In today's world, we communicate through multiple mediums,

such as text, voice, and visual (facial expressions and hand gestures), and both in person and virtually. In addition, we communicate across the country, if not globally, with people of different ages who have different languages as their mother tongue. The key question then becomes, how can we be sure a message was properly communicated?

To answer this question, we need to break communication down into three components, two of which are in the control of the communicator (intention and behavior) and one of which is in the control of the receiver (comprehension).

Intention. You may have the intention of communicating a particular message, but your behavior would suggest otherwise. A great example of this is when you've just concluded a frustrating conversation with person A that angered you, and you communicate with person B before calming down. For person B, the words used and the tone of voice do not match. In this case, there is a mismatch that causes confusion for the receiver.

One tip to avoid this: Check in with yourself before you start communicating with someone else. Ask what state of mind you are entering the situation with. Is it a state of mind that is serving you, or not?

Comprehension. Now let's look at the scenario in which your intention and behavior match, but for whatever reason, the receiver has not comprehended what you are saying. You may even argue that the receiver never really comprehends 100% of what you wish to communicate. This could be the result of several factors that include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Your communication is clear but too brief.
- There is a language barrier.
- There is a lack of understanding.



- They are not listening.
- They don't care.

One tip to avoid this: Ask people to relay back to you what they understood. This may work well with those who are junior to you or at the same level, but those who are more senior could prove to be a challenge. One great follow-up is to send a written summary of your discussion to the other person, giving him or her an opportunity to make corrections if required. This is so important to avoid the "I did not say that" conversations.

Intention, behavior, and comprehension. Because the use of texting seems to be growing at a rapid pace, the challenge can become even worse, as there can be multiple meanings to a communication. Take this seven-word sentence:

I never said he stole my money.

Depending on which word you emphasize, this sentence has seven different meanings. So which was intended, and which was comprehended? Without understanding the behavior, it becomes even more challenging to ensure that the intention and comprehension match. With more communication happening through messaging, chats, emails, and so forth, this is a recipe for greater pain for both the company and its people if it is not managed properly.

One tip is to reread your communication before sending it and ask yourself how else it could be understood. Highlight the necessary words in your own way to increase the probability of the receiver understanding it the way you meant it.

Now that you have more clarity on the communication protocol, let me share three tips:

- If you are unclear, ask questions. Doing the wrong thing is far worse than gaining clarity.

- Be aware of your state of mind before entering a conversation, and ask yourself if it is serving you.
- To make your writing more clear, ask yourself how a communication might be misinterpreted.

I'll leave you with another mountain-climbing experience that caused a tremendous amount of anxiety for several folks, all due to miscommunication. While climbing Chopicalqui in Peru, our group had no cell phone signal and had to resort to quick calls using a satellite phone. Every evening, our lead guide would send a message to our coordinator in Lima to let them know what point we had reached on the mountain and to confirm we were all OK. After that call, the coordinator would communicate on a family group chat with our spouses and parents.

On our way down, after summiting the 6,354-meter peak, some members were so tired they asked for a helicopter to take them down. As the group leader, I reiterated that a helicopter would only be considered in the case of an emergency, especially at our high altitude, where the air was so thin the mission could be more deadly. Since there was no emergency, no helicopter would be coming.

This was communicated to the coordinator, who only told the families about the request for a helicopter. Because a helicopter is called in only for an emergency, each member of the climbers' families had a sleepless and anxious night, wondering if it was their spouse or child experiencing trouble. It was a full 18 hours later, after we were able to pick up a phone signal and speak to our family members, that everyone calmed down.

If you treat all communication as you would on the mountain, where your life depends on it, you will deliver clearer messages and avoid misinterpretation. [AQ](#)

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