2.3: The Communication Model

Claude Shannon was a research scientist at Bell Telephone Company. In an attempt to improve communication along the telephone lines he worked to minimize the distortion that was taking place. Warren Weaver took Shannon’s concepts for the telephone and applied them to interpersonal communication. The end result was one of the most popular models of communication. Aptly named, the “Shannon-Weaver Model.”

As the Shannon-Weaver model suggests, a message begins at a source, is then relayed through a transmitter where it is sent using a signal towards a receiver. This message travels from sender to receiver while encountering all kinds of noise (sources of interference). The last step is for the receiver of the message to let the source know if the message was understood. This is referred to as Feedback and is a repeat of the communication process described here but for the Receiver back to the Sender.

Imagine that I want to let my wife know how much I love her. In my head, I have a thought of love. Since she is not a mind reader, I have to take my idea and select words or actions that represent my thought. I decide to send her flowers. In the middle of her hectic day she receives flowers from me with a note that I was thinking of her. She looks and smells...
the flowers, reads the note, and thinks over everything. Her first reaction is to wonder what I am apologizing for. She cannot think of anything and so she realizes that this is an expression of love. She texts me and thanks me.

Based on the Shannon Weaver idea, one person has a thought or idea in his or her head and wants to transfer it over to another person. Each part of the model is important, and the correct or incorrect use of each part can result in communication success or communication failure.

**Sender** is the source of the message. The sender has some information or content material they want someone else to know. It is generally acknowledged that the sender of the message has the primary responsibility for the success or failure of the communication act. This is because the sender controls many more of the variables of the communicative act than does the receiver of the message.

**Encoding** is the process by which the source takes an idea or thought and selects verbal and nonverbal symbols from his or her environment to send which he/she feels accurately represents that idea or thought. Many factors play a part in the encoding process including: social system, culture, past experiences, gender influences, formal and informal education, expectations, language, etc.

**Message** is the content of the communication. This is what the sender wants his/her audience to know. Message could be made up of such things as: composition, sentence structure, spelling, grammar, gestures, even objects like flowers.

**Channel** is the medium through which the message must pass. The channels of communication are our senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. Marshal McLuhan in his book, Understanding Media, says, "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message."²

For example, when you have finally fallen in love and you want that person to know how you feel. You decide on an interpersonal approach, but now you still have a choice as to the medium you can select to transmit your message. You could discuss it with that person, you could write a letter, you could send a singing telegram, or you could send flowers. The message may be the same in all four cases, but the medium affects how the message is interpreted. The selection of appropriate channels or senses is very important to the success of communication.

**Receiver** is the target audience of the message. There may be a chosen or primary audience for whom the message is intended, and a secondary audience, of all others who gain access to the communication. While receivers do not start the communication process, they do have accountability for their communication behaviors with respect to listening and providing accurate feedback.

**Decoding** is the ability to translate the message code into symbols that the receiver can understand. The object is for the receiver to interpret the message as the sender encoded it. This can never be done exactly because the sender and receiver do not share identical backgrounds from which the symbols have been selected. The best we can hope for is to come close. Why? The same influences that affect encoding: social system, culture, past experiences, gender influences, formal and informal education, expectations, language, etc., also affect decoding.

**Noise** is anything that disrupts or distorts the communication process. Noise may include an external annoyance such as someone coughing next to you or something psychological like a pessimistic attitude, which distorts any message sent. Noise can be external or internal and appear at any point in the communication process.
Feedback is information that is sent back to the source. It can come in many forms, from the receiver falling asleep to a verbal message. Feedback tells the sender how accurately you have decoded the message, and how you have decided to respond to it. Communication is a flowing process that moves from a sender to receiver and back again. Communication does not start and stop or move from one direction to another. It is a flowing process.

Shannon and Weaver’s model clearly demonstrates why even the simplest communications can be misunderstood. What if my wife looked at the flowers and thought, “What is he apologizing for?” “What did he do wrong?” “Just what is he guilty of?” Communication effectiveness depends on the successful integration of all the parts of the communication process.

In 1960 David Berlo created a linear model of communication as a process where a source intentionally set out to change the behavior of a receiver. Below is the Berlo Communication Model which fills in some of the key aspects of each part of the communication model; Sender, Message, Channel and Receiver.

Reference