

What are associated non-technical skills?

Associated non-technical skills are mental, social and personal skills that support technical and management skills. They help staff do their work safely and efficiently.

These skills include:

- Situation Awareness (Factsheet 5)
- Decision Making (Factsheet 6)
- Leadership (Factsheet 7)
- Communication (Factsheet 8)
- Teamwork (Factsheet 9)

What is communication?

Communication involves sharing information, giving feedback, pooling ideas and feelings among team members or across different teams.

There are five questions to ask when communicating:

- What is being communicated?
- How will it be communicated?
- What is the purpose of the communication?
- Who will receive the communication?
- Under what conditions (eg. *Commercial*) will communication take place?

Models of communication

There are two simple models of communication.

1. One-way

This involves the sender communicating information to one or more people who must understand the information without any further contact taking place.

2. Two-way

This involves a feedback loop in which a person responds to the information so the sender can check that the information is correctly received and understood.

Two-way communication may take more time, but it requires less planning and gives greater assurance that information has been accurately received and understood. This is important if the receiver is expected to act upon the information.

For example: When discussing a safety issue, like isolating electrical equipment, two-way communication is essential if potentially fatal risks are to be avoided.

Two-way communication may involve three forms of feedback:

- Informational – the receiver responds with the desired information or statement
- Corrective – the receiver asks questions seeking clarification
- Reinforcing – the receiver repeats information to check they understand.

Types of communication

There are various ways to communicate. Selecting the best way will get the best results. All communication involves language - it can be verbal (written or spoken words) or non-verbal (signs, gestures, tone of voice).

1. Face-to-face communication

This involves both spoken words and non-verbal communication. It is an effective way to exchange information, and is also suited to raising concerns, making complaints and resolving conflict.

2. Non-verbal communication

This can be used to reinforce spoken communication to help reduce misunderstandings. Non-verbal communication might include facial expression and eye behaviour, body movements and gestures, touching and voice quality. Non-verbal communication can be misunderstood, particularly if the words and the non-verbal cues don't agree. Cultural differences can also create confusion with non-verbal communication.

3. Written communication

This has limited effectiveness and is best suited to circulating news and information. Written communication should be as straightforward as possible and avoid jargon, shorthand, and non-standard symbols and abbreviations.

For example: Sending emails to multiple parties has an uncertain effect because there is no guarantee the message will be read or understood.

4. Team communication

Successful teamwork relies on opportunities for face-to-face-communication. If team members are separated by distance team identity can suffer and there can be confusion about team roles, responsibilities and objectives.

Briefings and tool box meetings

Briefings and tool box meetings help team members maintain shared understanding and situation awareness. They may be used at shift handovers or at task briefings and debriefings.

Shift handovers involve communication between outgoing and incoming personnel. The aim of the handover is to provide "accurate, reliable communication of task-relevant information across shift changes, thereby ensuring continuity of safe and effective working."

Effective shift handovers require face-to-face, two-way communication, following a standard procedure and supported by written communication.

Tool box meetings must involve all team members, including team leaders. They must be supported by management. They must happen before the team undertakes a task so that all features of the work can be discussed. Tool box meetings need two-way communication and standardised procedures, supported by written communication where the task requires it.

Debriefs are held at completion of a task or following an incident. The focus is on the team learning through examining team performance. They can follow formal or informal procedures depending on their purpose.

Communication barriers and solutions

Communication can be hindered by internal and external factors.

Internal factors relate to a person's background and characteristics and can include: language and cultural differences, motivation, expectations, experiences, prejudice, moods, status, physical impairments.

External factors relate to the work environment in which communication takes place. This can hinder understanding because of noise, interference, distance apart, time, lack of visual cues, gestures, facial expressions.

There are three key areas of possible communication errors.

Creating the message

Possible errors

- Incorrect or missing information
- Poorly written or presented information making it difficult to understand
- Language barriers
- Lack of, or poor use of, communication procedures.

Possible solutions

- Second person checks the message
- Training to increase the sender's communication competence
- Systems and procedures for communication, with templates for content and presentation
- Cut out irrelevant information
- Use two-way communication
- Repeat message in more than one format (e.g. written and verbal).

Sending the message

Possible errors

- Fail to send or send too late
- Message lost or sent to wrong person
- Inappropriate method (eg. email rather than face-to-face)
- Communication channel has limited capacity.

Possible solutions

- Implement communication procedures
- Use two-way communication.

Receiving the message

Possible errors

- Receiver only gets part of the message or doesn't get the message at all
- Message is received too late or is disregarded
- Message is misunderstood.

Possible solutions

- Use two-way communication
- Receiver requests required information from sender
- System in place to reformat or resend information.

Other factors also need to be considered. These include the restrictions caused by some personal protective equipment or a person's physical impairment which could limit their ability to hear essential communications.

For example: Noisy work environments are common in the mining and extractives industry. Communication can be undermined by this noise and the need to wear hearing protection. Quiet areas need to be available for having conversations, particularly if safety issues are discussed.

Four ways to improve communications are:

1. *Explicitness*

Avoid ambiguity, all messages must be clearly stated. Use two-way communication so the sender can be sure the receiver understands the information. All communications must be brief and to the point. Workers have a lot of competing demands and they don't have time to decipher long-winded messages.

2. *Timing*

When communicating with someone make sure it is a good time to contact them. If they are under heavy work demands the chances are the communication will only be partly understood or not clearly received at all.

Some information may be time-critical and must be given at the right time – not too early or too late.

Sometimes it may be essential to interrupt a person if the information is urgent and their safety depends on it. There may be information during an emergency that must be immediately given to the receiver.

3. *Assertiveness*

Effective communication is based on mutual respect. Each party has needs and they want to gain something from the act of communication. To promote respect the sender should be objective and avoid emotion or defensiveness. The sender needs to be appropriately assertive – giving information in a confident manner while remaining sensitive to the receiver's needs and situation.

Being passive or aggressive while giving information probably guarantees the information will be disregarded. On the one hand because the receiver may be unimpressed by the sender and on the other hand because the receiver may be offended by the sender's manner.

4. *Active listening*

Communication relies on active listening. The person receiving information must be an active partner in the exchange, they must concentrate on what is being said if they are to understand the messages. Usually listeners only pick up on a small part of what is said to them and, generally, their concentration diminishes as the exchange lengthens. This is another reason why communication must be clear and concise.

Active listening involves being patient, not interrupting the sender, asking questions at the right time, summarising what they have been told, making eye contact and staying engaged.

References

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Disclaimer

The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing in March 2010. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of Industry & Investment NSW or the user's independent adviser.

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