

Effective Communication

CAP Officer Basic Course

Introduction

Effective communication is a vital competency for every part of an organization. The benefit to an organization that employs effective communication includes improved interpersonal relationships, morale, and motivation that are founded on mutual understanding and trust. The benefit to an organization through effective communication is that teams achieve synergy, and become easier formed, better managed, and better able to respond to changing situations and mission needs. Effective communication allows plans to become more effective through clarity and commitment. This allows increased productivity as skills and processes are better applied. In essence, effective communication means increased results. Effective communication is a "life-skill" upon which sound relationships are established. (1)

1. Giving directions/instructions

You might ask "What is so difficult about giving directions/instructions"? We have been practicing communication skills since before we learned to walk. To effectively communicate a complex idea though, requires skills beyond elementary conversation. There are two basic rules to remember.

Rule 1: Organize your thoughts. In order to share your ideas, you must first organize them in a sequential and coherent manner. Organization is critical, because it creates a logical pattern for the listeners, allowing them to grasp the big picture intuitively. The listener can then focus on the details of the message without struggling to understand how you got from point A to point B.

A case in point. Imagine that a colleague has asked you for directions to wing headquarters. If you write the instructions out, your instructions will probably look something like:

- Drive west on 6th Avenue for about 3 miles.
- Take a left on Airport Road.
- At the second stop sign, turn left.
- Proceed to the end of road.
- Turn right into parking lot.
- Entry door is on east side of building.

Now take these directions and cut each one into a small strip of paper. Jumble the strips up and arrange them randomly. Give them to a colleague. Even with mixed-up directions they should have no trouble reaching wing headquarters, right?

The problem is that the directions are complete, but they are also completely unorganized.

Rule 2: Effective communication is collaborative, not competitive. Communication is a two-way process involving an exchange of ideas. If you try to force your ideas, you will prevent the exchange of ideas and will eventually frustrate or alienate the other person. (2)

By observing these two rules, you will minimize the possibility of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

To help reinforce the concepts presented in the above section, prepare written instructions for how to get to wing headquarters and have a fellow squadron member try to arrange the instructions into a logical sequence. What was the member's response to the order of the instructions?

An alternative activity is to write an announcement for a squadron event. The instructions to be given in the announcement might contain the following: the name of the event or activity, the date, the day, the start and end times, where the event will be conducted, the name of the point-of-contact (POC) with phone number, the facility or location, and directions on how to get there as described from several strategic or well-known geographical points of interest, i.e., wing headquarters, town hall, the local airport, etc. Have a squadron member review the announcement to ensure the instructions are clear and concise before the announcement is made. Remember, practice makes perfect.

2. Giving oral/written directions/instruction

In the communication process there are basically two forms of giving directions/instruction. They are either oral (verbal) or written.

Oral announcements/directions

Suppose you are a unit commander or a member of senior command staff and you are trying to explain a new concept. You know you have one opportunity to really get the message across. You also know that in order to be effective you are going to have to help the audience identify with something that will get the squadron members' interest; to actively engage them. You must then ask yourself, what makes people listen? There are three basic factors that engage people. They are:

- Self-interest (what's in it for me)
- Who is speaking; and
- How the message is delivered

Understanding the basic principles of how we communicate and why we listen helps you to realistically evaluate what you want to say and how you want to say it. The best way to engage the squadron members' self-interest is to show the importance of the issue to the members and what is in it for them. This will demonstrate that you understand their self-interest by focusing on their point of view at the very start. This will generate an interest in them to actively listen. As was said in the movie "Jerry McGuire" by Renee Zellweger "You had me at hello".

The next factor that determines whether people listen is who is speaking. Do not rely on your position to establish your credibility. What makes the difference is their perception of the speaker. If you project competence, your audience will consciously think about what you have to say and will take it more seriously.

The last factor, and probably most importantly, is how you deliver the subject. Without going into a detailed discussion on public speaking, there are some simple techniques that you can use to make your delivery more effective. These are:

Connect with individuals. Look directly at one person in the group while delivering each phrase. Never sweep the audience in an attempt to look at everyone. This may come off as being insincere.

- Use the word "You" frequently. When a speaker says "You" listeners feel that the speaker is speaking directly to them.
- Open your presentation with topics that resonate with the audience. If you do not see agreement in the audience do not move on to more controversial topics. Incorporate current issues into your topic that your audience can relate to.
- Frequently reference names of well known members of the squadron, group or wing. This creates the sense of having common acquaintances, forming a personal connection.
- Vocally punctuate phrases. Divide your presentation into phrases, each of which conveys a single complete idea. Pause for a moment before starting the next phrase. Think and clarify your thought before speaking.
- Restrain your body language. Gestures should be slight, but purposeful. Stand straight, shoulders back and head up. This will give the impression of being poised and confident. (3)

How do these tips relate to the AF Style Briefing lesson in this course?

Written announcements/directions

The written form can be either formal or informal. Written direction/instruction can be in numerous formats. These formats may be a formal or informal letter, a newsletter, a flyer, a proposal for grants, an expenditure request, a mission procedure, emails, or web page items. These various formats generally have a specific objective. These objectives may be to inform members of upcoming events, solicit volunteer participation or explain changes in regulations or policies.

Many of these formats are defined by who you are addressing or the office or agency to whom your communication is being directed. In the case of a formal type of communication (i.e., administrative authorizations), generally, these formats are covered under a CAP regulation. Business letters and CAP Memos usually fit a different format, although the objective may be the same. Flyers, web pages and emails are a less formal means of communication as is a telephone call.

Administrative Authorizations are official, published documents that authorize specific services and actions. Administrative Authorizations include Transportation Authorization (TA), Military Support Authorization (MSA), and Personnel Authorization (PA). The purpose of a Transportation Authorization is to authenticate eligibility to travel on Department of Defense (DoD) aircraft and use of military facilities, services and military vehicle transportation in accordance with DoD directives, CAP-USAF and CAP programs as approved by CAP-USAF personnel. Military Support Authorization authenticates a CAP activity as an approved program and specifies type activity, date, location and military installation support in accordance with USAF support that has been requested and approved and is approved by CAP-USAF personnel. A Personnel Authorization appoints individuals or groups to serve on boards and committees, and/or makes special assignments as approved by the unit commander or his designate (appointed on a PA). A Participation Letter identifies individuals

who have participated and are authorized to participate in a specific event. Administrative Authorizations are covered by CAPR 10-3.

Two styles of letters are authorized for use by CAP units. These are Memorandum-Style Letters and Business-Style Letters. The Memorandum-Style Letter will be used for communications between CAP units and when communicating with military agencies. The Business-Style Letter will be used for communications with private concerns and individuals not connected with CAP. These two styles of correspondence are covered by CAPR 10-1. (Also see the AF Style Correspondence lesson in this course for more details on the memos, letters and emails.)

Whatever form of communication you use, written or verbal, the message must be clear, concise and unambiguous if it is to be effective. It should have a logical sequence or progression, and there should be no misspelled words or improper grammar. If you are giving directions, you should plan out your starting point and your ending point. Arrange the directions in a logical and sequential order and keep the instructions concise and short. Trying to include too many facts or specific details into one statement could confuse and mislead the reader. It is best to group the directions into a multi-step approach. This leads to better comprehension.

Even though the degree of formality of the written message may vary, thoughtful consideration still needs to be given to the content of the message or idea you wish to communicate as well as spelling and grammar.

3. Selecting the right media

Each of the different forms of media has strengths and weaknesses. Picking the right form of communication depends on the message you are trying to convey.

A very powerful form of communication in business today is the e-mail. Text and images can be sent almost instantaneously to virtually anywhere in the world. E-mails do not require a response, although, if properly tagged, a receipt will be sent automatically to the sender when the email is opened. In many regards an e-mail is like a "one-way" conversation. The problem with this type of communication is that there is no indication that the person who received the e-mail actually understood the content of the e-mail or even received it if there is no tag attached to it.

When sending an e-mail you are doing it for a specific reason. That reason could be multi-faceted in that you could be giving a status of where your project is, work yet to be completed, and projected date for completion. The e-mail could also include a request for information needed, but not yet received, or support from other members of the team. Unless you are specific about exactly what information you need, who you need it from, and when you need it; it would be like hollering down a well. The only response you will get is an echo.

However, if you are specific, the response you get back should include the information requested in the time frame you specified, or a response of when you might expect to receive the information requested. The support team member requested will probably begin to correspond with you directly by e-mail. Ultimately, the information and support should be available to you. If you do not get a response in a reasonable time frame you should presume your intended receivers did not receive your initial e-mail request. In that case, you could pull the sent e-mail from your "Sent Items" file and resend the email again. You might consider using "Tools" from the task bar to tag "Request Read Receipt" before you send the e-mail. This will initiate a message back to you indicating that your message has been received by the persons in the "To" and "Cc" blocks. This way you will know who received your message. Whether they read it is another question.

Some e-mail editors can be quite quirky. It is not unusual for some e-mails to be deleted from the "Inbox" before they can be opened. To recover the message you can go to the "Deleted Items" file and drag the e-mail back into the "Inbox". The rule is, never assume the receiver actually got your message.

What types of information might you send using e-mail as the communication venue? Actually, since you can append all manner of file types, you can send virtually any kind of information; text or graphics, or both. The main point to remember is that each e-mail should have an intended purpose and the purpose more than the type of data will dictate what is communicated. As in writing or speaking, keep the subject relevant to a few key issues and keep each issue separate from the other issues. Clarity and separation of the issues is important.

The web page is another very powerful means of communicating information to a large group of people. Information on unit and wing training schedules can be posted to a web page. Any member who has access to the internet can view the information day or night. One problem with this type of communication is that if there are any facts missing from the information posted, mass confusion could result. It is essential that careful thought be given to the content of any information being posted on the web page. Credibility of information is paramount. Also, there is no assurance that everyone will see the information or use it as you intended.

The web page can be an effective tool to communicate schedules, tiered calendars, descriptive information about personnel, and programs, or events. Information posted on a web page can contain a "link" to another application or site that will connect you to more specific instructions or content. Generally, a web page is a one-way communication, but not necessarily. For example, on the web page could be a link to another application that would allow authorized members to review a proposal such as a request for or approval of expenditure. The linked-to application could allow you to approve or disapprove the request, append your electronic signature, and send the signed form to a specific individual.

In another instance, a web page could have a "link" for a conference that would allow you to register for the conference and use your credit card information to pay for the conference online. Can you think of other possibilities? Make a list of your ideas and share them with a squadron member. Ask them for their feedback of your ideas.

Newsletters are another important form of effective communication. Newsletters convey information about accomplishments of some unit, member, or support organization. The newsletter could also include photographs along with text. Newsletters may be one or several pages long. Again, correctness of information is very important. What type of information do you think might be most effective when using this venue? Make a list and share it with a squadron member and ask their feedback.

Flyers are similar to newsletters, but are generally restricted to one page. The flyer generally focuses on a specific activity or event. It conveys information about who, what when, where, why, and how of the event. For example, this might be a flyer on a wing-wide summer encampment for cadets. A problem with a flyer is getting all the necessary information included in the flyer while keeping it to one page. Generate a flyer for a squadron activity and share it with a squadron member. Ask for their feedback. Take note of the points made and evaluate how you could improve on the information content. Remember, you want the content to be precise and accurate, and as informative as you can make it.

Phone calls are a more personal form of communication that allows two-way conversation. Information can be exchanged, requests can be made, and if there are any questions, they can be addressed. Due to our very busy schedules, often the person we call is not available to answer the phone. You are left with the option of leaving a voice-mail message or just hanging up and calling again at another time.

The reasons for using various forms of communication are varied. Selecting the appropriate form is, in many regards, a personal choice. In some regards the form is already established by precedent. Knowing what form of communication works best for a given situation comes from experience and guidance from higher command.

Lesson Summary and Closure

Effective communication is an essential skill that everyone should develop. It is a "life-skill" upon which all sound relationships are established. The benefit to an organization of effective communication is that teams achieve synergy, and become more effective as a result. There are two rules to consider when giving directions/instructions. Organization of thought is essential, and effective communication is collaborative. Oral announcements should encompass these three factors: (1) Self interest, (2) Who is speaking, and (3) How the message is delivered. Written announcements can be either formal or informal. Effective communication must be clear, concise and unambiguous. Thoughtful consideration should be given to the content of any written message.

Various forms of communication have their strengths and weaknesses. Careful consideration needs to be given when selecting the best form of communication you can use to meet the task. It is important to consider who your audience is and what their needs are. Employing many of the principles and concepts presented in this lesson should be helpful in improving effective communication at the squadron level and above. Effective communication is something we should all strive for.

Works Cited

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