



THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

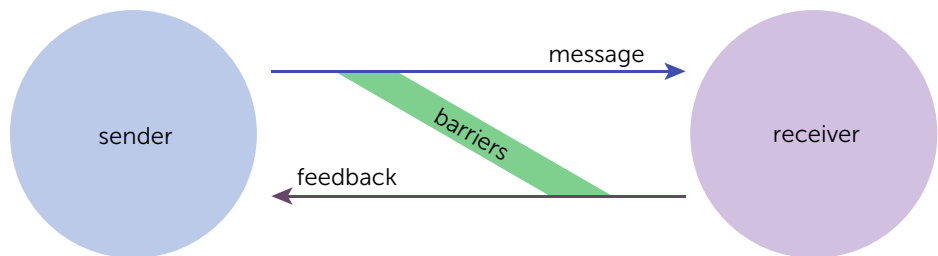
- Recognize barriers in the communication process.
- Communicate respectfully with people from many cultures and with people who have physical or mental health challenges.
- Explain the value of choosing appropriate vocabulary for your intended audience.
- Describe the challenges of communicating as a member of a group.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

You speak, listen, watch, use body language, and write to interact with others, all of which can be considered methods of communicating.

Communication involves more than one person. Even when your attempt to communicate feels quite unsuccessful, the person you're addressing does *receive* your communication. But perhaps she is not listening, or is not responding appropriately, or is not responding at all. In other words, your message isn't getting through, even though it's being received. No response, or an inappropriate response, is a form of feedback to your message. A traditional diagram used to illustrate this is set out in Figure 1.1.

FIGURE 1.1 Communication Theory



The person speaking, writing, or gesturing (the sender) sends a message to another person (the receiver). The receiver gives feedback to show that the message has been received and how the message has been received.

When someone doesn't respond to your communication or responds inappropriately, there are reasons for this breakdown; they are called *barriers to communication*. Possibly the receiver can't hear your message clearly; possibly the receiver doesn't agree with what you said and doesn't want to tell you so; or possibly the receiver is unable to respond for another reason. For example, your environment may be unsuitable for effective communication. Think of how difficult it might be to communicate with the victim of a hit-and-run accident under the following conditions: people around you are discussing the accident, it's raining, sirens are wailing, it's late at night, the victim is injured, and witnesses are trying to get your attention. These environmental factors are all barriers to communication, and they make it difficult for you to obtain the information necessary to do your job.

The complex and challenging nature of communication with victims, witnesses, and suspects requires law enforcement personnel to:

- take responsibility for the communication
- withhold judgments
- show respect
- be **empathetic**

empathetic

being able to understand and be sensitive to another person's feelings or responses to experiences even though you may not have had similar feelings or experiences yourself

- tolerate **ambiguity**
- look beyond the superficial
- be patient
- recognize their own biases
- be flexible
- send clear messages.

Other situations involve different barriers to communication. Specific problems may occur, for example, when you are dealing with people who don't speak English or who have physical disabilities or mental health challenges.

COMMUNICATING IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

According to Statistics Canada (2017), immigration to Canada has increased significantly over the last 25 years, and close to 22 percent of the total present-day Canadian population was born outside of the country. Therefore, law enforcement personnel in this country must frequently communicate with people whose first language is not English, and it is essential that they be able to communicate in any cultural environment. Law enforcement officers, in particular, must be able to obtain information quickly, accurately, and in a non-threatening manner, regardless of their environment.

Q: HOW CAN YOU COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT?

- Speak slowly and **enunciate**.
- Face the person and speak directly to him or her, even when using a translator.
- Avoid sustained eye contact if the other speaker is not making direct eye contact.
- Do not use **jargon**, **slang**, or **idioms**. Use short, simple sentences. Pause between sentences.
- Supplement your spoken words with visual cues such as gestures, demonstrations, and brief written phrases.
- Give numerous breaks.
- Respect the silence that people whose first language is not English need to formulate their sentences and translate them in their minds. Be patient as they do so.

ambiguity

vagueness or uncertainty; more than one possible meaning, interpretation, or outcome

enunciate

pronounce clearly

jargon

words or expressions that are commonly used by a select group of people and would usually be unfamiliar to others; some better-known examples include the use of *stat* in a hospital environment or *10-4* between radio users

slang

an informal, common, but technically incorrect use of words; an example is the use of *hanging out* to mean being somewhere for a while with no particular purpose

idiom

a phrase that is used to express something in a creative way; an idiom's meaning isn't clear from the words that make up the phrase; common examples include "cat got your tongue" (used when a person appears to have nothing to say) and "hit the books" (to study)

- Check the other speaker's comprehension by having him or her repeat your words and instructions, and remember to summarize frequently yourself.
- Provide positive feedback.
- Don't speak louder; it won't help, and it's insulting.

Non-verbal methods of communication are also important in a multicultural environment. It is helpful to remember the following:

1. An officer's body language and non-verbal messages can override his or her own words in high-stress and crisis situations, especially for people whose first language is not English. Imagine, for example, if at the scene of a house fire you are asking the homeowner to calm down while you are speaking very quickly and loudly, pacing, and sweating. Your words would have little effect; instead, your mannerisms would have a more influential effect.
2. Different cultures have diverse ways of communicating stress, confusion, and uncertainty; a person who is silent, nervous, and seemingly uncooperative may in fact simply be confused by the questions being asked.
3. Careful gestures and non-verbal cues from the officer can help the non-English-speaking person understand the verbal message and reassure the person that you are making every effort to have a mutually successful communication.

Officers should learn to avoid gestures or physical behaviour that another culture might find offensive or taboo. For example, the law enforcement officer should understand:

- when touch is appropriate and when it is inappropriate
- what different cultures consider to be a comfortable physical distance between two people
- what the protocols are governing eye contact in different cultures, and what is being communicated by eye contact or lack of eye contact
- how facial expressions and their meanings are affected by culture
- what the inappropriate and appropriate gestures are within a particular cultural group.



IN THE FIELD

You and your partner are responding to a 911 call for a domestic violence incident between a husband and wife. Neighbours reported hearing a female voice screaming for help and described the sound of a fight in progress coming from the living room area.

Upon arrival, you speak with the married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ming. You notice that the husband is doing all the talking. "Officers, we were just wrestling," he says, "and there was shouting coming from the TV, and it was on too loud. We are okay here and don't need any help, right dear? Thanks for coming."

As you glance at Mrs. Ming, you notice that her eyes are lowered to the ground while she nods in agreement.

Your partner says, "Fine, we are done here then. No report required," and he turns to leave. You feel uneasy about this and ask your partner to stay with Mr. Ming while you talk to Mrs. Ming in a separate area where you can have a candid and private conversation with her.

Your partner replies to your request by saying, "She deserves what she gets if she won't let us help her. I don't believe her anyway; she won't even look us in the eye, and that means she has something to hide."

You request an interpreter to attend while you question Mrs. Ming. She reluctantly reveals a history of domestic violence dating back three years. She advises that the violence has been increasing since her husband lost his job and reveals some bruising and broken skin on her back where he struck her repeatedly with the TV remote. Mrs. Ming reveals that she is afraid of police and indicates that her husband regularly threatens to have her deported.

Questions

1. What are some of the barriers to communication faced by Mrs. Ming?
2. How have cultural differences been misunderstood here?
3. What were some of the non-verbal signs of communication used in this example?

Below are examples of gestures and behaviour that people from other cultures could find offensive:

- In Canada, direct eye contact is thought to indicate honesty and reliability, whereas shifting one's gaze away is thought to indicate the opposite; however, in Latin America, direct eye contact is thought to indicate a challenge or aggression, and shifting one's gaze away from a questioner is often used to indicate respect.
- In Canada, it is customary to smile for introductions and to indicate a friendly attitude even between strangers; however, in Japan, a smile

is used as a polite expression of a range of emotions, from shame to anger. In Germany, smiles are reserved for family and friends.

- In Canada, we use the “OK” sign to indicate a positive response; however, this is a vulgar sign in some countries.

Also, be aware of problems that may arise from semantic differences across cultures and dialects. A single word within a language can have different meanings and nuances depending on its cultural context, and the way something is said is often more important than the words used. Remember, too, that law enforcement officials are viewed differently from culture to culture.

It is interesting to note that many police services now have a diversity component as part of their officers’ yearly evaluations. Regular diversity training is also offered. This is useful and necessary as we welcome new populations of immigrants into our country. The Hamilton Police Service officer evaluation form includes a section relating to diversity. It’s also important to take note that one of the core competencies a Canadian police candidate must demonstrate in order to be hired is the proven ability to work with a diverse population.



EXERCISE 1

COMMUNICATING IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

1. Divide into groups of four and take 10 to 15 minutes to discuss the following:
 - a. Share a time when you experienced a miscommunication due to a cultural difference. How have you adapted your communication style as a result of this experience?
 - b. How can you prepare yourself to be an effective communicator in a multicultural environment?

Assign one member of your group to ask the questions and keep the conversation on track (this includes encouraging all members to contribute), one to record your findings, one to introduce your group members to the class (for question 2, below), and one to share the findings with the class.

2. Reconvene as a class and have each group take turns sharing its findings.
3. Individually, write a list of cultures you identify with. Don’t stop at country of origin—think about such things as provincial or regional culture; leisure-activity culture; political, philosophical, or religious culture; and so on.
4. Meet and greet: circulate around the room and try to find people who also identify with the cultures you listed. Put first names beside the cultures, and try to get at least one name beside each.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Diversity in Canada is not limited to culture. Because of our increased understanding over the last several decades of the complexity and range of mental illnesses, we now realize that systematically institutionalizing people with mental health challenges is not a solution (a positive trend). We also are faced with the very real crisis of not having enough supports in place for those dealing with mental health challenges (a negative trend). The Canadian Mental Health Association (n.d.) estimates that about 20 percent of the population will experience a mental illness in their lifetime.

This means that as front-line workers, you will be communicating with individuals living with mental health issues. Among their challenges can be an inability to communicate effectively with others.



EXERCISE 2

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

1. In groups of four, have a discussion about what you know about mental health challenges. Use the news media, television and film, and personal experience to discuss such things as symptoms, attitudes, misconceptions, and risk factors.
2. As a class, have a large group conversation using these questions:
 - a. What are some common misconceptions about mental health challenges?
 - b. What are your concerns about communicating with people who have mental health challenges?
3. In pairs, come up with effective communication strategies you could use in the following scenarios:
 - a. You are dispatched to the scene of a conflict in a public park. A person has called to report seeing two people yelling at an older female. When you arrive, you see a woman on a park bench being yelled at by two young men. You hear one man say, "You crazy weirdo. Give me back our Frisbee. It's not an alien spacecraft!" You hear the woman respond with, "The voices told me to save you. I took the space disc to save you. You must leave before they exit the disc and attack your neurons."
What would you do?

b. You are working as a mall security guard and are called by a store manager to help with an unruly customer. When you arrive at the store, the owner immediately starts talking to you in an agitated manner. She points to a customer who is standing in front of a keychain display and demands that you remove the customer. As you approach the display, you see a man who is talking to himself while rapidly rearranging the keychains. You hear him say, "Red before green, L before M, do not let yellow near pink."

What would you do?

c. You are giving a bicycle safety talk to a class of grade 4 children. As you proceed with your talk, you notice a boy who is talking to himself and making elaborate hand gestures. He has drawn the attention of the children around you.

What would you do?

d. You are a transit security officer trying to explain to a teenage boy that he cannot bring his large pet snake onto the bus. He tells you the snake is his best friend, and it keeps him out of danger. He also says the snake is writing a book about the bus adventures the two are having, and it is critical the snake be allowed on the bus.

What would you do?

4. Get together with another pair and share the ideas you came up with for effectively resolving the above communication challenges.

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Advances in assistive technologies and increasingly enlightened attitudes about accessibility have made it possible for people with physical disabilities to lead independent lives in the community. But people with physical disabilities still face many challenges, and it is critical that they can count on law enforcement professionals to be mindful and considerate when communicating.

Q: HOW CAN YOU HELP FACILITATE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH PEOPLE WHO HAVE PHYSICAL DISABILITIES?

- *Recognize the existence of a disability.* People with disabilities may use gestures to draw law enforcement officers' attention to their condition; they would prefer that their disabilities not be ignored.
- *Understand the nature of the disability.* Some disabilities impair a person's ability to formulate and send a message; other disabilities impair a person's ability to receive

and understand a message. Understanding the nature of the disability allows law enforcement officers to understand the barriers to communication and to shape their own efforts at communication accordingly.

- *Be resourceful in attempting to establish communication.* For example, written notes are often the best way to communicate with a hearing- or speech-impaired person.



EXERCISE 3

COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

- 1.a. In pairs, brainstorm to create a list of communication challenges people with physical disabilities could possibly face.
 - b. For each challenge you identify, provide a solution that could help overcome the challenge.
2. Get together with another pair and compare lists.
3. In your group of four—and referring to both lists—choose five challenges and their solutions to write a document you could use as a training handout for newly hired law enforcement professionals.

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE AND SEMANTICS

VOCABULARY CONSIDERATIONS

As a law enforcement professional, you must be comfortable communicating with a wide variety of people: schoolchildren, elderly people, high-ranking officials, and the media, to name a few. Interviewing a child about a crime she witnessed requires a different communication style than you'd use to interview a store owner who witnessed the same crime. Your words need to be tailored to reassure and get the most from each witness.

For example, if you said to the store owner, “Can you tell me when you think the bad man came into the store?” you might offend her. Likewise, if you said to the eight-year-old witness, “When did you first take note of the perpetrator’s entrance into the establishment?” you might confuse her.

The English language is colourful and complex, and we often employ synonyms (words that mean the same as other words—for example, *inquire* is a synonym for *ask*) to make our communication more interesting. Consider, for

example, the word *walk*: you can stroll, saunter, sidle, or slink. Fiction writers choose words for maximum effect. Law enforcement officers must also pay attention to their word choices. If you love the English language and enjoy finding just the right word when conversing with others, you might consider using the simplest approach while at work.

Think about the differences in meaning for these questions:

“When did you first notice the suspect walking away from the scene?”

“When did you first notice the suspect sauntering away from the scene?”

“When did you first notice the suspect slinking away from the scene?”

CONNOTATION AND DENOTATION

denotation
the dictionary meaning
of a word

connotation
any additional impression
a word carries with it
beyond its dictionary
meaning

The **denotation** of a word is its dictionary meaning. For example, the words *house* and *home* both mean a dwelling place. The **connotation** of a word refers to any additional impression the word carries with it. For example, when we think of *home*, we usually think of comfort, love, and warmth. Those adjectives do not appear in the dictionary definition of *home*.

Think of the words *childlike* and *childish*. Both have similar definitions, but which word seems to have a more positive meaning? Words that have high connotative meaning are also value-laden and should be avoided if possible.



EXERCISE 4

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE AND SEMANTICS

1. In pairs, come up with as many synonyms as you can for the word *said*.
2. Have one person in the class go to the board and, using the words generated by each pair, write a master list of all the synonyms the class came up with.
3. Read each scenario and the question that follows. Circle the most appropriate word from the choices in brackets by considering the person being interviewed.
 - a. You are called to the scene of a bicycle theft. A bike had been left in front of a convenience store, and as the bike owner—a 13-year-old male—was exiting the store, he witnessed a suspect get on the bike and pedal away.
You ask the youth, “What did the (perpetrator, thief, bad guy, suspect, thug) look like?”
 - b. You are dispatched to the home of a woman who reported a garbage-can fire on her street. When you introduce yourself to her, you realize she is a recent immigrant and is just learning to speak English.

You ask the woman, "When did you first (register, see, check out, take note of) the fire?"

- c. You are patrolling a neighbourhood and come across an elderly man who seems to be in distress. He tells you his dog has gotten off its leash, and he can't find the dog.

You ask the man, "Has your dog (run away, taken off, split, vamoosed) before?"

- d. A well-known defence lawyer is questioning you on the witness stand. She asks you to describe any outstanding characteristics you noted about a suspect you interviewed.

You reply, "He had a large mole on his right cheek and he (was heavily inked on his arms, had sleeve tats, had tattoos covering both arms)."

4. In groups of four, discuss the connotations that make each word in the following word pairs seem more negative or positive:

thrifty/stingy

cunning/intelligent

slim/skinny

chef/cook

vagrant/homeless

fragrance/smell

curious/nosy

cop/officer

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY IN GROUPS

Communicating is often a one-on-one situation. As was seen in the illustration of the communication process at the beginning of this chapter, a sender sends a message, a receiver receives the message, and the feedback indicates how much of the message was absorbed, understood, and accepted.

There are many situations, however, when you will be communicating with more than one person. After all, law enforcement is a group effort, and you will work with investigators, forensic specialists, civilian personnel, members of other law enforcement bodies, and court personnel, to name a few. These people are members of your group. When mixed messages are sent among members of the group, or when various members interpret a message differently and fail to assist one another in the communication process, confusion usually ensues—another communication barrier.

Q: HOW CAN YOU ENSURE THAT YOU DO YOUR PART TO BE AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR IN A TEAM ENVIRONMENT?

- Adopt a clear, simple communication style that you use consistently.
- Be sure that messages you send to multiple people or groups are identical.
- Do not hesitate to ask for clarity when needed.
- Be open and transparent with information as appropriate.
- Solicit feedback to ensure that you are being understood.

**EXERCISE 5****COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY IN GROUPS**

1. The telephone game: Ten volunteers go to the front of the room and stand in a line. Another volunteer hands the first person a written message. That person whispers the message into the ear of the second person. The second person then relays the message by whispering the message he received into the third person's ear, and so on until everyone has received the message.
2. The last person tells the class the message she received. The first person then reads the message he was handed.
3. Class discussion: How different were the two messages? What are some factors that may have caused the changes in the message?

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Everyone communicates, but the effectiveness of the communication process varies. Effectiveness is reflected in the types of feedback given and depends on how well the barriers to communication between sender and receiver are overcome. Law enforcement officers must be effective communicators. They must understand that certain barriers to communication, such as language differences, mental health challenges,

physical disabilities, and working in groups, present challenges.

These challenges may seem overwhelming, but a genuine desire to communicate effectively using common sense, respect, an informed approach, and a willingness to adapt will ensure that as law enforcement professionals, you will overcome communication barriers.

KEY TERMS

ambiguity, 5

connotation, 12

denotation, 12

empathetic, 4

enunciate, 5

idiom, 5

jargon, 5

slang, 5

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What steps can you take to ensure good communication with people who speak little to no English?
2. What steps can you take to ensure good communication with people with physical disabilities or mental health challenges?
3. How can law enforcement professionals learn to communicate better with a certain cultural group?
4. In what ways do law enforcement services benefit from respectful communication with the communities they serve?
5. What can you do now that will improve your communications skills in preparation for your career in law enforcement?

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

EXERCISE 6: EXPLORING PERSONAL SPACE

Divide into pairs. The people in each pair should face each other at a distance of about 1.5 metres. One person in each pair should move gradually closer to the other. Notice the effects of this exercise, particularly noting when you feel the other person stepping into your personal space.

EXERCISE 7: IDENTIFYING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

The chances are good that your class consists of people from a variety of cultures. Have a class discussion on the variety of cultures in your class, and ask classmates from different cultures to volunteer information about their own cultures. What are some of the cultural differences in communication you found?

EXERCISE 8: UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF WORDS

Law enforcement officers must be effective communicators. Consider the phrase “Words have power.” As a class, discuss the different meanings this phrase might have in a law enforcement context.

EXERCISE 9: EVALUATING YOUR GROUP WORK STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Law enforcement officers must learn to work in teams. Group work is an essential way for you to learn teamwork skills. Use this brief quiz to identify your strengths and weaknesses. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 for each question (5 = I strongly agree; 1 = I strongly disagree). Compare answers with a partner, and discuss the reasons for them. Think about how you might improve in areas where you are weak.

1. I am good at producing organized documents.
2. I am a good presenter.
3. I am good at organizing people.
4. I am good at generating discussion.
5. I am good at keeping notes.
6. I know how to use presentation programs, such as PowerPoint.
7. I like to lead and inspire others.
8. I do my share.
9. I expect others to carry me along.
10. I expect to get my way.
11. I ask others what they think.
12. I am not afraid to disagree.
13. I am willing to take the time to solve problems.
14. I generally wait until the last minute to finish a project.
15. I need deadlines to focus my attention.

16. I practise presentations before I give them.
17. I do better working in groups.
18. I enjoy group work.
19. I have had bad experiences working in groups.
20. I want to learn to deal with group work.

EXERCISE 10: DEVELOPING YOUR CULTURAL AWARENESS

One way to develop your cultural awareness is to be observant of the behaviours, language, and even dress of those around you as you go about your day. Keep a one-week journal of interactions you observe or participate in that involve cultural differences (list format is fine).

Examples might be:

- You were in line at a convenience store, and you witnessed an exchange between a customer and a staff member where they spoke to each other in another language.
- You walked by a restaurant with signage that had its name written in Mandarin.

