

COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SECRETARIAL PROFESSION

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Abstract

Numerous human activities, be they private or public rely so much on communication. It is not an overstatement to say that organization's image and effectiveness are related to the standard of communication systems and their operations. Loss of business in terms of money, background and clients has often resulted from poor communications. Thus the success of any organization whether big or small, profit or non-profit oriented depends on effective communication of the management and other sectors. Communication is at the centre of management process and also forms a vital instrument of social interaction. Effective and efficient communication skill lies at the center of secretarial practice. This paper examines important communication skills the secretary needs for the performance of her professional tasks in order to achieve the effectiveness and efficiency in secretarial profession and office communication.

Communication is the main link in the attainment of organizational goals. Every organization is by its nature, a fossilized entity which can only be animated by the interaction or relationship among human beings who perform its function, and, the animation of an organization is only possible through communication.

Communication is a term that has been defined in different ways by different people. Of these definitions, the term communication may be used to mean a medium or means of passing information from one person to another (Ohakwe, Idih and Chukwumezie 2000). It is the transfer, transmission or exchange of ideas, knowledge, beliefs, attitude or emotions from one person or group of persons to another. It could be defined as the transmission of information from one source or sender who possesses certain facts which are available to him at the time which the recipient may not have known about (Anumihe and Nwivu 2000).

It is an act of conveying our thoughts and feelings to other people and receiving in return their reactions in accordance to the purpose, system and manner of act. It is an interaction through which persons or groups relate to each other and share information, experience and culture.(Jayaweera,1991). It is the process by which one person or group shares and imparts information to another person or group such that both people or

group clearly understand one another. It is the transferring of message to another party in such a way that it can be understood and acted upon.

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Communication is effective and complete when the transfer of an idea from source to a receiver results in an intended change in knowledge, attitude or overt behaviour on the part of the receiver. All communications have to be originated, produced, transmitted, received and understood. Communication requires two parties- the Sender who is known as the Originator/Encoder and the Receiver who is the target/Decoder.

Communication Process:

Process here denotes the series of actions, operations or occurrences designed to achieve a certain goal. A process is the attribute of an activity to be continuous, proceeding in stages. Communication is not a unilateral or one way process. It involves organized procedures and requires finding out whether the message has been fully understood. The acknowledgement or reaction of the receiver with regards to the message gives rise for further action. The process continues in that form. Communication process requires three basic elements:- the communicator, the message and the receiver. The source who is the communicator/sender is referred to as the encoder. He conceives of what to communicate, organizes them in the form of a lesson and selects the means or media by which to send it. The medium is the channel of communication such as his voice, facial expression, body gesticulation or movement, teaching aids etc. The receiver is the decoder who interprets the meaning of the message which the communicator transmits in his own system such that he can understand.

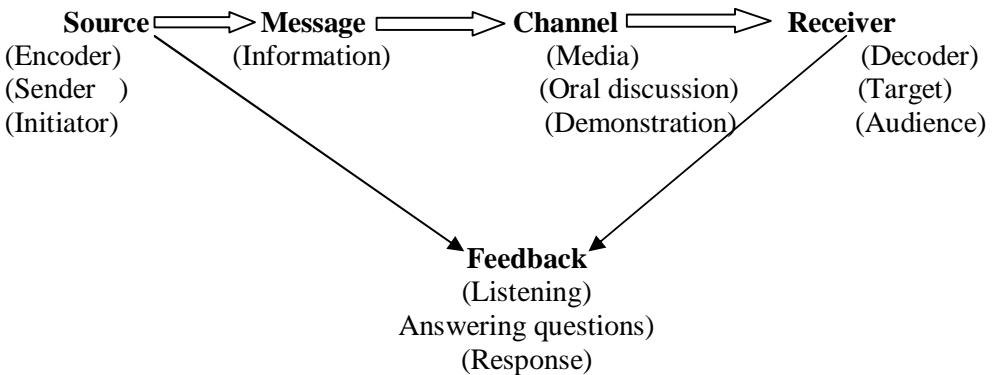


Figure 1.1 showing Communication Process (Unamba, Obioma and Ukoha 2000)

The communication process is a continuous one as feedback gives rise to new activities. It is important that one is sensitive to the reactions of the receiver while communicating.

In Establishing Good Communication by the Secretary, the Following Factors Have to be Put Into Consideration:

- i. The source of the communication (the sender)
- ii. The content of the communication (message)
- iii. The process by which the communication is produced.
- iv. Method or mechanism by which the communication is transmitted (channel, medium).
- v. The destination of the communication.
- vi. The procedures involved in receiving communication.
- vii. Understanding of the communication by the recipient.
- viii. Proper organization and presentation of the content and communication process.
- ix. Consideration of the receiver's interest and capabilities.
- ix. Use of appropriate vocabulary.
- x. Ability to avoid noise in the channel.

The Secretary and Communication

Information is the greatest purchasing power required to achieve ultimate success in all fields of human endeavours. The secretary in the communication process is known as a role model. A secretary is an executive assistant who possesses a mastery of office and communication skills, demonstrates the ability to assume responsibility without direct supervision, exercises initiative and judgment. The secretary is virtually involved in communication in everyday performance of her duties. A secretary is a frontline representative of an organization because she is the first person with whom clients come in contact with. It could be on telephone or face to face communication. She spends her time receiving, contacting, talking and seeing people. She passes messages, instructions and explanations. This includes the secretary's tone of voice, gestures, facial expression, body language and general appearance. Even her dressing goes a long way in improving her communication skills and more importantly, in portraying and promoting the image of the organization or office where she works.

The secretary as the mouth-piece of her organization always presents the image of the organization by being courteous, tactful, helpful and efficient in her communication skills. Effective communication skill is a *sine-qua-non* for achieving business excellence, and a good communicator (secretary) must be a good listener and speaker. The visitors or customers, are the king and judges who determine whether an organization should stand or not. The secretary should be conscious of this and therefore, use words with skill in her expression of truth and understanding. Her communication style should aim at preventing unfavorable public opinions. She has to communicate to people using a pleasant, clear speaking voice at all times. Not speaking aggressively or in a hot-tempered way. The secretary takes dictations and transcribes them into correspondence, which is dispatched to its destination. This correspondence includes orders, quotations, acceptances, contract terms and conditions. Each of these items will invoke a response from the recipient or

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addressees, who may order materials, proceed to manufacture or engage in some other activities which form part of the intricate network of business life.

In addition, the secretary produces reports, minutes of meetings, memos, speeches, seminars and keeps record. It is communication skills that enhance her effective performance of these functions. The nature of communication is that two parties are brought either directly or indirectly into contact with each other, so that the needs or views of the first are made clear to the second, who reacts in such a way as to satisfy the needs or take account of the views expressed. However, the trend in technology has also given rise to the use of automated approaches in communication process.

This includes the use of computers, word processors, fax and other telecommunication gadgets which are more efficient in producing routine information in a standardized format. This is an aspect of communication skills that improve the secretary's work performance. A secretary being a front line representative of an organization is conferred with the responsibility of image-making for the organization. The secretary's work regularly brings her face to face to public focus; she is therefore, an image-maker not only for herself but also for her chief executive and the organization. She must have some tools of a public relations practitioner to build the image of the organization. In whatever type of organization she finds herself, the secretary's responsibility should be the establishment of positive corporate image for the organization which is achieved through effective communication skills.

Rules to Guide the Secretary's Communication Skills

- i. The correct form of communication must be used. A memo for instance, is appropriate to draw the attention of a colleague to small point that has risen while it would not be appropriate for the circulation of detailed proposal.
- ii. The important party in any communication activity is the recipient, not the source. It is what the recipient thinks you mean that matters and the secretary has to use words that he can understand, speak or write clearly. She should be able to develop her argument clearly.
- iii. The timing of a communication affects its impact. The secretary should not raise matters on impulses but rather plan her communication so that it arrives at a time it can be dealt with calmly and be given proper attention.
- iv. Homophily: This refers to a corporate sensibility, an empathy that links source and receiver in a harmonious, uninhibited communicative act. The
- v. Effectiveness of the communication act is enhanced when there is a rapport and harmony between the source and the receiver. In this sense, the
- vi. Communication acts flows without any inhibitions, but rather smoothly, coherently and cohesively in its two way direction or even in a multi-

directional system, representing transmission and feedback between individuals or groups.

- vii. There should be fidelity in communication process which helps to achieve “accuracy” in details because the higher the quality of fidelity of the channel, the more the effectiveness the communication act and the message destination and also, the more effective the message reception.
- viii. There should be replication of message by the receiver. This means the aim of the secretary as the communicator should be to convey message clearly to the receiver who should understand it as is intended by the secretary (sender).
- ix. Show the receiver that the source wants to listen if the receiver wants to speak back and put the receiver at ease, so that the source gets all the receiver wants to say back. Remove all type of bias the source may have and focus on the present speech the receiver has. Do not attack personality, but handle the issue.
- x. The secretary should apply code-mixing and code-switching: This means changing her language code during communication situations, in order to make more effective communication. She should also change the language code depending on the type of communication situation, to suit the new situation.

Causes of Poor Communication Skill by the Secretary

- a. ***Emotions, Bias and Attitude:*** When the secretary is biased or has made up her mind to receive the message in a different way instead of the way it is supposed to be, then a barrier is created.
- b. ***Inadequate Listening:*** Poor listening on the part of the secretary whether on giving or receiving of information, can lead to the premature release of information or to a release of wrong information.
- c. ***Talking When the Secretary is Supposed to Listen.*** This will not give the secretary the chance to understand what the person is saying and to perceive it the way that is expected of her.
- d. ***Psychological Noise:*** This refers to inhibitions that create disequilibrium in the psyche or mental disposition of the secretary in communicative context. The distraction that results from the established secretary’s mental balance may lead to flaws in communication such as fidgeting, stuttering, stammering and loss of focus in the communication.
- e. ***Heterophily:*** This refers to divergent and influences on the secretary or partner that disrupt the empathy between sender and receiver thus, rendering the communication ineffective.

- f. Semantic Noise:** This is seen in the area of language competence on the side of the secretary. It could be phonological when it is caused by speech defects, incoherent mother-tongue interference, malapropism etc and grammatical when it involves syntax, sentence structure, tenses etc.
- g. Appearance:** This is a very important factor in secretarial practice. The secretary's appearance whether shabby, over-dressed or underdressed can tarnish the image of the organization for first impression matters.
- h. Poor Human Relations:** The secretary should treat people with courtesy. The callers should have a sense of belonging. Poor human relation is the inability to interact effectively with callers or socialize with colleagues, customers and even junior workers. This might be due to some emotional problems, prejudice or inability of the secretary to express herself fluently and in a pleasant voice and speech.
- i. Language Problem:** This is an important aspect of communication skill for the secretary. Language is vocal symbols through which a social group cooperates. If a secretary interprets a statement differently from what the communicator has in mind or vice-versa, it will constitute poor communication skill.
- j. Information Overload and Selectivity:** This refers to a situation in which the secretary bombards the receiver or the visitor with much more information. In this case, the receiver is bombarded or overloaded by surplus message. For this reason there may be poor communication flow.
- k. Difference in Perception:** The differences in perception on dealing with people on the part of the secretary are poor communication skills.
- l. Vocabulary:** The vocabulary which the secretary uses in communicating to others must be appropriate, non-offensive and mutually understood, not using specialized forms of vocabularies or high vocabulary.
- m. Personality:** The secretary's pre-judgment of a caller's status before attending to such one is a poor communication skill. She should not feel too superior or too inferior when communicating with callers or other workers.
- n. Confusion in Meaning:** The secretary's inability to differentiate between certain words or concept is a poor communication skill. When the meaning of a word is not clarified by her to suit a particular purpose, communication is likely to break down.

Skills in Secretarial Function

i. **Note-Taking:** This is the art of taking down the executive's speech which may be in form of oral instruction, recorded tape or from any other means of communication. The ability of the secretary to produce comprehensive and readable letters is an aspect of communication skill in carrying out her functions.

ii, **Transcription:** The secretary organizes and makes outline in her own words and also changes some meanings which should be accurate and neat.

iii, **Command of English Language:** The secretary who has adequate knowledge of English Language is in a position to make very clear distinction between facts of which she is certain and notions about which she is vague or doubtful. In doing this, she has to understand such areas as spelling, grammar and usage, frequently used addresses, recognized forms of letters, individual and personality etc. Competence in English Language helps the secretary in her choice of words when dealing with visitors or callers especially the difficult or rude ones. She knows when words are confused for the other, such as being/been, spill/spiel, pill/peel etc.

iv, **Arranging, Covering and Reporting Meetings of Departmental Boards:** Annual General meetings etc. Clerical duties involving replying to correspondences, filling operations records management. Other unspecified functions such as booking flights and accommodation, running specialized errands should be handled by the secretary.

v, **The Secretary Should be Computer Literate and Have Word Processing Skills.** The use of computer by the secretary encourages the image of an organization. Information is quickly retrieved and work is more accurately, perfectly and quickly carried out to win more contracts.

vi, **Proficiency in Shorthand, Typewriting and Computer:** The secretary implies not only good speeds in shorthand and typewriting but also should have the ability to transcribe one's shorthand notes accurately.

vii, **Sending Goodwill message:** The secretary should exhibit her expertise while greeting a caller to her organization. Also in condolence letters, the secretary expresses sympathy to the bereaved person, family or organization as the case may be while appreciation and congratulatory messages should be brief and yet possess the right tone of language.

viii, **Producing Business Letter Report:** The secretary's ability to arrange her material logically, read with understanding, sift information, reassemble these facts and present them clearly, concisely and without distortion are the communication skills which assist the secretary in preparing mail able letters, agenda, minutes of meeting and reports.

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ix, **Writing the Minutes:** In writing a good minute, the secretary should ensure complete understanding of the discussions and decisions to be reported by having a mental grasp of them. If in doubt, ask for clarification, verbatim reporting may be adopted during the meeting.

Other Secretarial Functions Include:

Preparing agenda and notice of meeting.

Typing minutes of meeting and materials to be published.

Doing personal banking and local purchases.

Ordering supplies for the office.

Composing letters and helping prepare reports.

Screening visitors.

Act as memory aid to the boss.

Make or book appointments for the boss and keep records of them.

Answer the telephone and make outgoing calls.

Opening and sorting mails.

Taking dictation and transcribe same on the computer or typewriter.

Keep financial records and handle impress accounts.

The secretary uses mail registers, movement registers, files numbering and indexing in the creation and storage of information.

Conclusion

Communication skill is a very important act and process which also is crucial in every aspect of secretarial function. This means that communication skill enhances a secretary's employment prospects, good reputation and advance in her career.

Effective communication skill of a secretary is the way of achieving an organizational goal and promotion of the organizational image. For the effective communication skill to be achieved, there must be cordial relationship between the secretary and the people involved in the organization in one way or the other.

The secretary cannot perform all this functions without the acquisition of the communication skills. The secretary therefore, needs the communication skill in order to function effectively.

Recommendation

In a very simple and short way, it is better for a secretary to avoid all those activities that may lead to poor communication process or may cause ineffective communication which makes her not to achieve the organizational set objectives.

She should rather go for or put into practice the effective skills needed in secretarial function and profession. She should be composed, humble, neutral, kind, enthusiastic, goal achieving, hard working etc in order to achieve the effectiveness in communication skill.

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