



LACK OF COMMUNICATION

“The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” George Bernard Shaw

Look at these pipeline controllers in the Beijing Oil and Gas Control Center. They are sitting next to one another. They speak the same language. Both are looking at the same monitors. The controller on the left is explaining something to the controller on the right. I think the controller on the left believes that communication is taking place. *How does he know? What problems might occur in this simple exchange of information?* In any exchange, there is a sender, a message, a channel, a receiver, and feedback from the receiver to the sender.



These problems can occur:

- Sender PERSONALIZES message.
- Receiver PERSONALIZES message.
- Message may be incorrect, incomplete, incomprehensible, ignored.
- Channel may have NOISE.
- Sender and/or receiver may be distracted, disinterested, disgusted.
- Feedback may be missing, garbled, confusing, or ignored.

And each may suffer from the illusion that communication has taken place. All that is necessary for good communication is that both the sender and receiver do a good job, that the message and feedback are accurate and complete, and that the channel be clear.

Sounds simple, yet people and organizations have problems with communications. These problems cause errors, accidents, increased costs, damage to equipment and pipelines, and lost opportunities. A manager for a gas pipeline distribution company told me that I should go and train employees of the gas transmission pipeline on professional communications in operations. I told him that those employees would say the same thing about his company's employees. The fact is that each of us thinks we do a good job with communications and others need to do a better job. *What is your opinion of your communications skills? What is your opinion of your manager's and coworkers' skills?*

Humans communicate all the time; humans cannot not communicate. We communicate with words, tone and volume of voice, actions, facial expressions, body language, actions, dress, appearance, presence, and even our absence.

When we communicate face-to-face, the message is 55% body language, 38% tone of voice, and 7% the words we say. This places an additional burden when most of our communication is over a phone or via electronic messages. Your company should develop policies, procedures, and practices to ensure accurate communications in operations. Then each person should follow those policies and use those practices in each exchange of information.

It would be great if there was a magic formula that would prevent lack of communication. There is not a formula. Use these suggestions and discuss other ways to have accurate communications:

- Always identify yourself and determine the name and the location of people with whom you are speaking.
- Assume personal responsibility for the accuracy and completeness of your messages.
- Ask for repeat backs from the receiver to ensure the message was understood.
- Speak slowly and clearly, do not use slang terms, avoid words that sound alike, use the phonetic alphabet.
- Listen carefully, ask questions to clarify, and repeat what you heard.
- Use printed materials, online information, and displays so that both the sender and the receiver can see the same information.

In most incidents or accidents, a communication problem is usually a contributing factor or the basic cause. We need to practice constant vigilance when we are communicating and we are communicating **all the time**.