

Sent Doesn't Mean Understood

Why Better Internal Communication Begins With Interpretation, Not Just Information

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Executive Summary

Organizations often treat communication problems as transmission problems: Was the email sent? Was the procedure explained? Was the instruction delivered? Yet transmitting information does not guarantee shared meaning.

Employees interpret messages through their experience, knowledge, expectations, and context. Even a seemingly clear instruction leaves information unstated—information the receiver must infer before turning the message into action. That gap between intended meaning and interpreted action can create inconsistent execution, rework, delays, quality issues, and avoidable costs.

Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Wolfgang Iser's reception theory, and workplace and project-performance research, this article proposes a practical shift for managers:

The goal is not to eliminate interpretation. It is to make interpretation visible before it becomes action.

The Invisible Gap Between a Message and Its Meaning

Consider Edgar, an operations manager at a small U.S. concrete company. In this composite scenario, he faces a recurring problem: he gives what he considers a clear instruction, yet his employees do not always act as he expected. The result can be delays, rework, and frustration on both sides.

His question seems simple—and genuine:

Why don't my employees understand and follow the instructions I give them?

At first glance, the communication process appears complete: a sender delivers a message to one or more receivers. But this model leaves out something essential: the receiver does not encounter a message in a vacuum.

Edgar tells his team:

"We need to improve our performance and complete each project faster."

Edgar knows what he means. Jaime hears something different. He believes he is already working as fast as he can, so he assumes the additional time must come from somewhere else—perhaps a shorter lunch break. Robert, who is particularly attentive to detail, interprets the same words as a request to trade precision for speed.

Edgar delivered one message. Jaime and Robert heard the same words.

But the company ended up with three different meanings.

The problem is not necessarily that Edgar failed to communicate or that his employees failed to listen. It begins with the assumption that a message delivered is the same as a meaning shared.

Communication Doesn't End When the Message Is Sent

Communication is not simply a linear transfer of information. Once a message reaches another person, that person actively interprets it through prior experience, knowledge, expectations, and context.

This is where a concept from Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics becomes unexpectedly useful for business. Gadamer argued that understanding never occurs from a completely neutral position; we approach what we encounter from a preexisting horizon of assumptions and experience.

Applied to the workplace, Edgar and his employees can share the same words without yet sharing the same meaning. Asking "Does everyone understand?" therefore reveals very little. Jaime and Robert did understand something. The problem is that their interpretations may not match Edgar's intent—or one another.

Effective communication should therefore be assessed not only by what was said, but by whether the people involved developed enough shared understanding to coordinate action.

The Operational Decisions Hidden in What We Don't Say

Different horizons are only part of the problem. Even a carefully constructed instruction leaves information unstated.

Before Edgar's team can act on "complete each project faster," they still need to answer questions such as:

- What exactly does "faster" mean?
- Which part of the process is causing the delay?
- Can speed increase without compromising quality?
- How will the team know when performance has improved?

These are not minor details. They are operational decisions hidden inside an apparently simple instruction.

Wolfgang Iser's reception theory offers another useful lens. A text does not provide every piece of information required to construct meaning; readers make connections, draw inferences, and fill in what remains indeterminate.

In literature, those gaps can enrich the reading experience. In an operational instruction, they can multiply the possible courses of action.

Jaime and Robert were never explicitly told to shorten a break or reduce attention to detail. They constructed those responses in order to act on an incomplete directive.

Yet interpretation itself is not necessarily the problem. Robert's concern could expose a quality risk. Jaime's reaction could reveal that the team is already operating near capacity. Another employee might identify a bottleneck in equipment, materials, scheduling, or coordination.

The problem begins when those interpretations remain invisible. Once they are surfaced, employees become more than the final destination of an instruction: they become a source of operational intelligence.

When Interpretation Becomes a Business Cost

Interpretation does not remain abstract. It shapes decisions, which shape actions, which shape business outcomes.

Message → Interpretation → Decision → Action → Business Outcome

When employees translate the same objective into different actions, an interpretation gap becomes an execution problem. The potential consequences include inconsistent work, rework, project delays, quality issues, inefficient resource allocation, and additional managerial oversight.

Research suggests that unclear expectations are common. In a nationally representative Gallup study of 18,665 U.S. employees, only 47% strongly agreed that they knew what was expected of them at work. Gallup describes clear expectations as foundational to productivity because, without them, there is no agreed-upon standard or roadmap for success.

Project-management research illustrates how communication problems can scale. In its 2013 Pulse of the Profession research, the Project Management Institute (PMI) reported that two in five projects did not meet their original goals and business intent, and that ineffective communication was a contributing factor in roughly half of those unsuccessful projects. PMI estimated that US\$75 million was at risk due to ineffective communication for every US\$1 billion spent on projects.

That figure is historical and should not be treated as an estimate of current losses. Its value here is the mechanism it illustrates: a communication gap can move from conversation to execution and ultimately affect timelines, budgets, and business objectives.

PMI also identified a perception gap between senders and receivers. While 62% of business owners and 60% of executive sponsors believed they communicated strategic alignment and business benefits effectively, only 43% of project managers agreed.

This brings us back to Edgar. From his perspective, the instruction was delivered and the objective seemed clear. From the perspective of the employees expected to execute it, critical questions remained unresolved.

The cost of poor communication can therefore begin before anyone makes a visible mistake—in the distance between what one person believes they communicated and what another person understands they are expected to do.

From Instructions to Shared Understanding

Edgar's original model assumes a direct path from instruction to execution:

Instruction → Execution

But between those two points lies interpretation. The managerial challenge is not to remove that process, but to bring it into the open.

Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue offers a useful direction. Dialogue does more than confirm whether the receiver heard the sender correctly. It creates an opportunity for both sides to test assumptions, expose missing context, and expand their understanding of the problem.

This changes the purpose of feedback. Rather than asking an employee to repeat an instruction to prove they were paying attention, a manager can use questions to discover what the employee understood, what information they believe is missing, and what action they intend to take.

The goal is not identical perspectives. It is sufficient shared meaning for coordinated execution.

A Four-Step Framework for Making Interpretation Visible

Closing the communication loop does not require turning every instruction into a lengthy meeting. Managers can begin with four practical steps.

1. Define the Expected Action

Translate broad intentions into observable outcomes. Clarify the result, the part of the process that needs to change, and the constraints that must remain in place.

Instead of: "We need to work faster."

Try: "We need to reduce the completion time for this stage without increasing rework or compromising quality controls."

2. Surface the Interpretation

Replace confirmation questions with questions that reveal intended action.

Instead of: "Does everyone understand?"

Ask: "What do you understand needs to change?" or "Based on this objective, what would you do differently?"

The first question seeks confirmation. The second reveals interpretation.

3. Identify Context Gaps

Create room for information the sender may not have. Ask what could prevent the objective, what risk might be overlooked, or what part of the process is creating friction.

Robert might identify a rework risk. Jaime might explain that the team is already at capacity. Another employee might reveal that the real bottleneck is material availability or equipment downtime.

At that point, Edgar is no longer only checking whether employees understood him. He is improving his own understanding of the operation.

4. Build Enough Shared Understanding Before Execution

Align the team around four elements:

Objective → Constraints → Actions → Success Criteria

The goal is not to make everyone think alike. It is to create enough shared clarity for people to coordinate their work toward the same outcome.

The traditional model:

Manager → Instruction → Employee

can become:

Manager → Message → Interpretation → Dialogue → Shared Understanding → Action

Communication then becomes more than a mechanism for transmitting decisions downward. It becomes a way to improve those decisions before they are executed.

Key Takeaways

- Message delivery does not guarantee shared understanding.
- Employees interpret instructions through different experiences, knowledge, expectations, and contextual assumptions.
- Unstated information requires employees to make inferences before they can act.
- Interpretation becomes a business problem when different meanings lead to inconsistent execution.
- Questions that reveal intended action are more useful than simple confirmation questions.
- Employee perspectives can expose risks, constraints, and operational information managers may not have considered.
- Shared understanding does not require identical perspectives; it requires enough common meaning to coordinate action.

Conclusion

Organizations can invest in more meetings, emails, collaboration platforms, standard operating procedures, and increasingly sophisticated tools for moving information faster. But increasing the speed of transmission does not necessarily solve a problem of meaning.

The next time an instruction seems perfectly clear, the most useful question may not be:

“Did they understand?”

It may be:

“What did they understand—and what will they do as a result?”

Because the real purpose of workplace communication is not to make a message travel intact from one person to another. It is to build enough shared understanding for people to make better decisions and act together toward a common business objective.

The goal is not to eliminate interpretation. It is to make interpretation visible before it becomes action.

Sources

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Blanca Patricia Segura Silva is a B2B content writer, researcher, and educator with a background in literary studies. Her work explores the intersection of communication, education, workplace dynamics, culture, and human behavior, translating complex ideas and research into clear, actionable content for professional audiences.