

Effective Communication – Part 2: The Language of Cues



The Hidden Language We All Speak

Every day, on the flight deck, the hangar, or the boardroom, we're surrounded by signals that speak louder than words. These signals—what psychologist Dean Barnlund called *cues*—are the building blocks of all communication.

He described three kinds that are always in play:

- **Public cues** – The setting around us: lighting, background noise, displays, uniforms, even the time of day.
- **Private cues** – Our inner world: thoughts, emotions, and assumptions that color how we interpret things.
- **Behavioral cues** – What others can actually see or hear: tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture, and word choice.

They overlap constantly, forming a steady current of meaning beneath every conversation. Sometimes, those cues carry more weight than the actual words we use.

Meaning Beyond Words

Barnlund suggested that meaning isn't passed from one person to another—it's *created* in the moment. We give meaning to what we see, hear, and feel, often without realizing it.

Think of a captain reminding the crew about **sterile cockpit** procedures. The instruction itself may be straightforward, but tone, timing, and atmosphere all matter. A sharp delivery can sound like irritation; a calm reminder feels like leadership. The **public cues**—engine noise, radio chatter, flickering displays—add their own pressure. The **private cues**—each crewmember's stress level, fatigue, or confidence—further shape how that message lands. And the **behavioral cues**—a glance, a pause, a sigh—can tell the rest of the story.

In seconds, the crew constructs a shared understanding. Sometimes it's aligned. Sometimes it's not.

In aerospace, words carry only part of the load. The real meaning lies in the rhythm, timing, and emotional texture of how those words are delivered—and in how everyone interprets them through their own internal filter.

Leadership in Action

Good leaders tune in to all three layers of communication, not just what's spoken. They stay alert to what psychiatrist **Henry Harris** once called *the total situation*—a concept later applied by Barnlund to communication. It reminds us that every moment is surrounded by cues: environmental, emotional, and behavioral. Leaders who recognize them see the whole picture, not just the words.

On the flight deck, that awareness might mean catching the slight change in a pilot's tone that signals stress. On the hangar floor, it could be noticing when silence means hesitation, not agreement. In the office, it might be seeing that a teammate's "I'm fine" doesn't match their body language.

The best communicators read the room before they speak, and they listen with their eyes as much as their ears.

The **sterile cockpit rule** is a perfect example. It works not just because the policy exists, but because the cues around it—steady voices, focused posture, clear acknowledgment—signal shared discipline. When those cues break down, so does the culture of respect that keeps distractions in check.

Barnlund warned that most communication failures stem from ignoring or distorting key cues, or from clinging to outdated assumptions. In aerospace, this can manifest as a missed callout, an unspoken concern, or a hesitation to challenge. Leaders who stay open

to the *total situation* create teams that adapt faster, speak up sooner, and trust one another more deeply.

Aerospace Connection

The **sterile cockpit rule** illustrates this perfectly. Compliance isn't maintained through policy alone; it's reinforced by cues. A firm but respectful tone, consistent body language, and shared situational awareness ensure that professionalism doesn't drift when distractions appear.

When everyone reads and respects the same cues, safety communication becomes seamless.

Key Takeaway

Cues create context, and context creates meaning.

By reading and responding to the total situation—public, private, and behavioral—
aerospace leaders build trust, clarity, and safety into every conversation.

Looking Ahead

Next week, we'll explore **Dynamic and Continuous**: why communication in aerospace is never static. Messages evolve the moment they're spoken, shaped by feedback, emotion, and time. We'll examine how professionals adapt in real time—listening, adjusting, and refining—to ensure operations and relationships run smoothly in a constantly moving environment.

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References

- **Barnlund, Dean C. (1970).** *A Transactional Model of Communication*. In *Foundations of Communication Theory*, eds. Kenneth K. Sereno & C. David Mortensen. Harper & Row.

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