

Effective Communication – Part 3: Dynamic and Continuous



Communication never stops.

Even silence, posture, or absence sends a message. Dean Barnlund described communication as *dynamic*—constantly changing—and *continuous*—impossible to switch off. Meaning doesn't exist on its own; it's created moment by moment as people interpret the world around them.

Dynamic: Communication as a Living Process

Barnlund wrote that “nothing in the universe ‘has’ meaning, but anything may become a stimulus to evoke meaning.” In other words, meaning is not a thing that travels neatly from one person to another. It evolves within the interpreter.

Every communication exchange—verbal, nonverbal, or environmental—is alive. It shifts and reshapes as people observe, interpret, and respond. A word spoken in calm can comfort; the same word, said under pressure, can sting.

In aerospace, this dynamism is everywhere. Consider a crew briefing: tone, timing, and facial expression change the perceived intent behind each statement. A pilot who says, “I’ll handle it,” might be offering reassurance—or signaling defensiveness—depending on context and cues. Meaning evolves as others react and recalibrate.

For leaders, this means communication is never “set and forget.” Once a message leaves your mouth—or even your face—it takes on a life of its own, influenced by others’ perceptions, past experiences, and emotional states.

Leadership takeaway:

Treat communication as a living process, not a one-time event. After every message—spoken or unspoken—pause to observe how it lands. Adjust tone, clarify intent, and remain open to reinterpretation. Effective communication is a continuous feedback loop, not a broadcast.

Continuous: The Conversation That Never Ends

Barnlund argued that communication “has no beginning nor end, even in sleep or under conditions of sensory deprivation, for man is a homeostatic rather than static mechanism.”

Even in silence, our minds translate experience into meaning. The absence of communication *is* communication—especially in leadership.

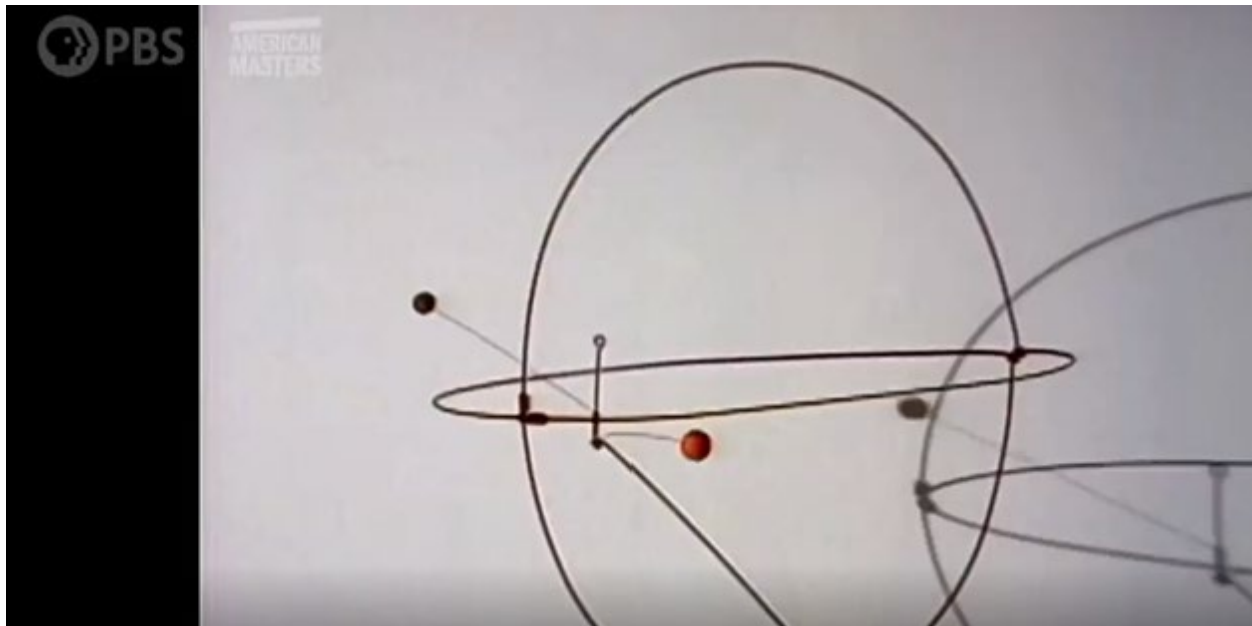
A “silent leader” may believe they’re showing calm confidence, but the team may read their quietness as disapproval, detachment, or uncertainty. A manager who never acknowledges effort may unintentionally communicate indifference.

Communication flows whether we intend it or not:

- **A delay in replying** to an email communicates priority (or lack of it).
- **A folded arm** during a discussion may signal discomfort.
- **A long pause** after a question may feel like judgment.

The key is to become aware of what your silence and presence communicate. In safety-critical environments, where precision and trust are paramount, these subtle signals can influence confidence, compliance, and crew coordination.

Barnlund compared the process to an **Alexander Calder mobile**—each movement, no matter how slight, disturbs the balance and requires adjustment until a new equilibrium is reached. Likewise, every communicative act—words, gestures, pauses—alters the balance of understanding within a team. Skilled communicators sense that movement and restore equilibrium through openness, acknowledgment, and dialogue.



Example of Alexander Calder's kinetic mobile

Leadership takeaway:

Silence is never neutral. Make it intentional. When choosing to pause, clarify your intent:

- “I’m thinking through what you said,”
- or “Let me take a moment before I respond.”

This turns quiet moments into constructive space rather than confusion.

In Aerospace Practice

Dynamic and continuous communication forms the backbone of Crew Resource Management (CRM) and Safety Management Systems (SMS). Effective teams recognize that communication doesn’t begin with the first checklist callout or end when the engines shut down—it’s a constant flow of signals, adjustments, and shared meaning.

Whether on the flight deck, in maintenance, or within executive teams, communication is the lifeline of operational safety. When leaders understand its ongoing nature, they model responsiveness, psychological safety, and adaptive thinking—the same traits that prevent accidents and strengthen safety culture.

Looking Ahead

Next week, we'll explore communication's **irreversible** nature—why words and actions, once shared, can't be taken back, and how aerospace leaders can model accountability and foresight through mindful communication.

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References

- **Barnlund, D. C. (1962).** *A Transactional Model of Communication*. In L. A. Thayer (Ed.), *Language and Communication: A Book of Readings*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.