

Effective Communication – Part 4: Irreversible & Unrepeatable



(From Barnlund's Transactional Model of Communication)

The Moment You Speak, It's History

Once words are spoken—or silence is chosen—the moment is gone. Communication can't be rewound or perfectly replayed. Every exchange is shaped by context, emotion, and perception at that instant. That's what makes communication both powerful and fragile.

Building on this, Dean Barnlund described human communication as *irreversible* and *unrepeatable*—two features that distinguish living systems from mechanical ones. Machines can be restarted; messages can be replayed exactly. But people, Barnlund wrote, are “spontaneous systems ... governed by internal organizing principles which are themselves subject to change.”

Irreversible: No Undo Button in Human Exchange

Communication, like life, moves in one direction. Once meaning is shared, it becomes part of shared history. Barnlund compared it to natural growth:

“Some systems can only go forward from one state to another, never returning to their original state. ... One cannot start a man thinking, damage his self-respect or threaten his security, and then erase the effects and ‘begin again.’”

In aerospace, that truth has weight.

- A misunderstood clearance can't be "unsaid."
- A hasty tone in a safety meeting can't be unheard.
- A sarcastic comment on the flight deck can't be taken back—only clarified, owned, and repaired.

Our words and actions leave traces—on perception, on trust, on team dynamics. That's why disciplined, deliberate communication is a hallmark of safety leadership.

Unrepeatable: Every Message Is New

Even when we say the same words again, the meaning shifts. As Barnlund explained, "One cannot expect the same message to generate identical meanings for all men, or even for a single man on different occasions."

Each moment carries new variables: fatigue, stress, tone, background noise, or a shift in authority. A routine safety briefing or standard callout may sound familiar—but it never lands *exactly* the same way twice. Meaning evolves with the moment.

Effective communicators recognize this fluidity. They don't rely on repetition alone—they refresh their message for the conditions, people, and emotions in play *now*.

The Human Factor

Communication breakdowns remain one of the most common contributors to incidents in aerospace. Many occur not because someone lacked skill, but because timing, tone, or interpretation changed the meaning. Recognizing that each exchange is irreversible and unrepeatable helps safety professionals treat every message as operationally significant.

Every transmission—verbal, written, or nonverbal—carries consequences. When leaders pause, choose words intentionally, and listen for how they land, they strengthen both understanding and safety performance. Consider maintaining steady eye contact or a calm vocal tone, as these nonverbal cues reinforce the message beyond words.

Leadership in Action

- **Pause before transmitting.** Once spoken, words can't be unsaid.

- **Take responsibility for impact.** When miscommunication occurs, address it early and directly.
 - **Adapt, don't recycle.** Repeated messages need fresh framing and context.
 - **Reflect and learn.** Each exchange—especially the ones that don't go as planned—teaches something about timing, tone, and trust.
-

At WYVERN

We believe communication lies at the heart of aerospace safety. Every conversation—whether on the flight deck, hangar, or boardroom—builds or breaks trust. Treating each word as *irreversible* and each exchange as *unique* reflects the professionalism, awareness, and care that define safe operations. It's how we protect lives by inspiring excellence in aerospace safety.

Looking Ahead – Part 5: Circular & Shared

Next week, we'll explore how communication isn't a one-way street but a shared creation. Meaning doesn't travel from "sender" to "receiver"—it's *co-authored* in real time.

If you are not subscribed to our weekly newsletters, subscribe now at the bottom of this page. For further resources and guidance on implementing Safety Management Systems, contact WYVERN, THE industry expert. Attend our [SMS Training Workshops](#) or ask about our SMS software. [Contact us for a FREE SMS demo!](#) Together, we can elevate aerospace safety and create a safer future.

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.