

Effective Communication – Part 5: Circular & Shared



Why communication isn't one-way—and how shared meaning drives safety

Most of us were taught that communication works like a straight line: someone speaks, someone else listens. But real life isn't that simple. Dean C. Barnlund challenged that old view, showing that communication is *circular*—a live exchange where everyone is both sender and receiver at the same time.

Meaning doesn't travel in one direction. It evolves between people. Every word, glance, tone, or pause affects the next moment and reshapes what's understood.

Shared Meaning in Action

In aerospace, that shared process happens constantly. A captain briefs the crew before descent, but the message's clarity depends on how it's received. A question or small nod from the first officer gives feedback that subtly changes the captain's tone or emphasis. It's not a one-way announcement—it's a living loop of meaning.

Think about it:

- A mechanic's report only helps if the pilot interprets it correctly.

- A dispatcher's weather update only improves safety when the crew confirms what it means for them.
- And on the flight deck, CRM thrives when communication flows both ways.

When those loops stay open, teams understand each other quickly. When they close—when people assume instead of asking—mistakes slip through the cracks.

See Circular Communication in Action

Calm Exchange Watch this short clip of a steady conversation. Notice how each person listens and adapts. Their pace is unhurried; their expressions show thought and curiosity. The dialogue moves like a circle, not a straight line—each response shapes what comes next.



This video has no audio. For visual effect only.

Communication isn't a relay—it's a rhythm. Every response keeps it alive.

Contrast: High-Energy Interaction

Animated Discussion In this clip, the exchange grows intense. Voices overlap, gestures become sharper, and the people seem more intent on making their point than

understanding the other. It's a powerful reminder that *talking isn't the same as connecting*—communication must be shared to be effective.

When energy rises and emotions take over, the circular flow often breaks. True communication requires pausing long enough to listen, reflect, and rebuild that shared space of understanding.



This video has no audio. For visual effect only.

Volume doesn't equal clarity. Listening under pressure keeps the loop intact.

The Human Factors Bridge

Barnlund's circular view reminds us that **meaning isn't delivered—it's discovered together**. In safety-critical work, most misunderstandings don't come from a lack of data; they come from assuming others see it the same way you do.

Leaders who understand this invite dialogue. They don't just talk *at* people—they talk *with* them. They ask, "Does that make sense?" or "What's your take?" and really listen to the answer. That's how they build trust and prevent small errors from becoming serious ones.

Barnlund connected this to what he called the *Law of the Total Situation*—the idea that effective communication means responding to *everything* in the moment: words, tone,

body language, setting, even silence. When someone filters out a cue or ignores context, they break the circle and risk losing meaning.

WYVERN Connection

At WYVERN, we cover communication alongside Human Factors in our **Safety Leader Training**. Participants explore how Human Factors, leadership, and communication dynamics directly influence safety performance. Through guided discussions, practical exercises, and reflection, leaders learn to replace one-way “telling” with two-way understanding—ensuring messages are heard, interpreted, and acted on as intended.

When communication becomes truly circular, teams strengthen awareness, collaboration, and trust—the foundations of a healthy safety culture.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we’ll explore why communication is **Complex**—how layers of emotion, timing, and perception interact to shape meaning in unpredictable ways.

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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.