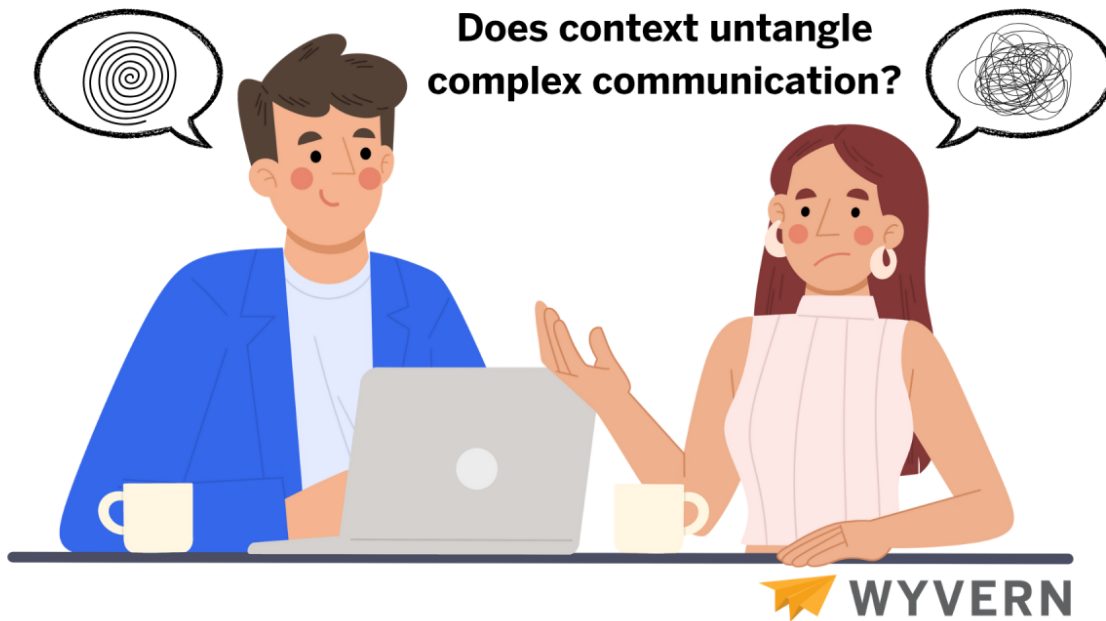


Effective Communication — Part 6: Complex and Context-Dependent



Communication never happens in isolation. It's shaped by environment, emotion, hierarchy, and timing. Dean Barnlund wrote that *"it is the whole of speech, including not only the words left unsaid but the whole atmosphere in which words are said and heard, that communicates."*(page 44)

In other words, words don't carry meaning on their own — *people assign* it. Two professionals can use identical language and reach completely different understandings depending on the moment.

The Total Situation

Barnlund said that effective communication depends on responding to *the total situation*. When we ignore or misread cues — tone, body language, workload, or setting — meaning breaks down. He called this *communicative negligence*.

In aerospace and beyond, the total situation is everything.

- **Example 1 — Flight Deck:** A captain says calmly, "Check that again." In cruise flight, it sounds like routine verification. During a high-workload approach in turbulence, the same words may sound like a warning or even criticism. Without

awareness of stress levels and tone, intent can be misjudged — possibly escalating tension on the flight deck.

- **Example 2 — Office Meeting:** A manager remarks, “Let’s circle back on this.” In a relaxed, supportive environment, it signals collaboration. In a tense setting — after deadlines have slipped or priorities have shifted — it can feel like dismissal. The words stay the same; the meaning shifts with the emotional climate.
- **Example 3 — Maintenance Hangar:** A supervisor’s quick, “Can you finish that before lunch?” might simply mean scheduling awareness. But if the technician is behind because of missing parts, it can sound like blame. Context — resource constraints, fatigue, previous conversations — determines whether the comment motivates or discourages.

When communicators fail to read *the whole picture* — environment, timing, emotional tone — words can sound complete but fall short of being truly *shared*.

Conditional Thinking in Action

Barnlund urged leaders to think conditionally: adapt words and tone to time, place, people, and circumstance.

- **Flight crews** adjust how assertively they speak depending on who holds command authority — but always keep safety first.
- **Team leaders** clarify intentions when stress or workload might alter how messages are heard.
- **Executives** frame safety or business initiatives differently for pilots, maintainers, and finance teams, recognizing that each group interprets “risk” through its own lens.

This flexibility — not repetition — defines effective communication.

WYVERN Connection

At WYVERN, this principle runs through **Safety Leader Training**, where participants explore how Human Factors, leadership, and communication dynamics intersect. Through case discussions and practical exercises, leaders learn to “read the room” — or the ramp — before they speak. Recognizing context is not just a soft skill; it is *situational awareness applied to people*. When leaders remain alert to the total situation, they foster trust,

psychological safety, and operational performance—the foundation of a healthy safety culture.

Looking Ahead

Barnlund's model reminds us that communication is dynamic, circular, irreversible, and always context-dependent. The more aware we are of the cues, climates, and conditions surrounding our words, the more effectively we lead.

As WYVERN's mission affirms: **Protecting lives begins with inspiring excellence in communication — because meaning, like safety, is always shared.**

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.