

# Effective Communication: “If Anything Can Go Wrong, It Will”

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One of Murphy’s best-known laws suggests, “If anything can go wrong, it will.” Given such a grim prognosis, the Air Force needs leaders who can communicate effectively with their people, helping guide them by the many pitfalls that can stand as obstacles to the goal. Thus, it makes sense that we understand how communication and leadership interact to get the mission accomplished.

Not everyone is a leader, and those who hold leadership positions are not necessarily effective in their roles. Likewise, all organizations communicate, but perhaps not efficiently. As future leaders, it is important to examine our own communication abilities. Granted, communication is a complex process, one that requires some basic understanding. However, we must always work toward improvement—always asking, “could we do it better?”

The Air Force anticipates, rather than reacts to, Murphy’s Law and potential communication problems by offering a variety of educational programs. For example, all four levels of Professional Military Education offer communication instruction, with special remedial programs available. The USAF Academy’s Executive Writing Course receives acclaim throughout the Air Force as well as in civilian organizations. At the base level, commanders recommend their personnel complete the USAF Effective Writing Course. Thus, the Air Force expenditure of resources underscores the importance placed on this vital area.

Almost everyone knows about Mr. Murphy and his laws, but you may not be familiar with his Finnish counterpart, Osmo Wiio.

Wiio devoted years to the study of organizational communication and set forth four laws which Gerald M. Goldhaber shares with his readers in *Organizational Communication*. It is here that Murphy and Wiio might help us in a unique way by alerting us to the pitfalls associated with the communication process.

**Law 1.** Communication usually fails—except by chance. It appears that we don’t do a very good job of communicating—with sometimes devastating results. Our newspapers tell of increasing divorce rates, the alienation of youth from parents, and general mistrust between the American people and their elected officials. On an international basis, there is continued political instability, rising inflation rates, and the ever-present impact of increasing oil prices. While not a panacea for these problems, effective communication could lead to improved understanding between people and a better interpersonal or group relationship. As Murphy said, “Nothing is as easy as it looks.” Law 1 has four corollaries:

## 1.1 If communication can fail, it will.

Like dropping a piece of buttered toast on the carpet, Murphy’s research indicates that the chances of the buttered side landing face-down are directly proportionate to the cost of the carpet! It seems that just when we need communication to be exact and understood, it falls short of its mark. The cause could be our indifferent attitude toward the communication process, the subject, or our faulty perception of the intended receiver.

## 1.2 If communication cannot fail, it, nevertheless, usually does fail.

There is always the potential for misinterpretation, misperception, typographical errors, or other barriers to effective communication. No matter how we might try, our efforts will not always succeed. Maybe the situation is similar to that of the general’s aide who, believing the routine morning arrival of the staff car had indeed occurred, stated as such to the general without first checking. When the general stepped to the curbside and, found no car, the aide began explaining how he had assumed everything would be in order. The gen-

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eral responded, "If you assume the car is here, then get in!" The initial communication process had failed, the aide blundered, but the general's communication was very clear.

1.3 If communication seems to succeed in the way which was intended, it must be in a way which was not intended.

The familiar saying goes like this: "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." Sometimes, we don't understand the directions given us, but don't want to appear "dumb" in front of the boss or our peers. Too often people accept a task and quickly set off to get the job done, while not really knowing what it was they were supposed to do. That's probably what happened to the pilot who radioed, "I'm lost, but I'm making record time."

1.4 If you are satisfied that your communication is bound to succeed, it is then bound to fail.

Your best chance of beating this one is to be clear in your own mind concerning what you want to say. Careful planning should be a part of your communication event. Remember, too, to know your audience. Your choice of words, emotional appeals, and even your personal appearance communicate, or can blur your attempt to communicate, so you can't overprepare. Murphy warns, however, that "It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious." Give it a try though. You might get lucky!

**Law 2.** If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm. Another Murphyism: "Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse." There are so many reasons com-

munication can fail, it just makes sense to work that much harder to be sure that all we can control is working for us. That takes time and effort. Remember: "A shortcut is sometimes the longest distance between two points."

**Law 3.** There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message. Too often we are guilty of anticipating what someone is about to say and immediately engaging our thought process in our reply. Trouble is, we stop listening to what the person actually does say, sometimes resulting in confusion, misinformation, and misunderstanding. We do not know what other people will say before they say it, because we are not them!

**Law 4.** The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed. Beware of information overload. Be more selective in your communication and realize that more is not always better. An anonymous cabinet member of President Warren G. Harding's administration purportedly said, "When he stands up to speak, battalions of words march from his mouth and scour the countryside in search of an idea; and when they find one, they promptly trample it to death." Remember that too much information can be as ineffective as too little information. A good rule to practice is, "keep it simple."

You might begin to think that effective communication is almost an unattainable goal. No matter how much we try, it probably won't be enough. Of course we can't anticipate all the potential barriers to effective communication. However, to be effective leaders, we must work hard to master the skills involved in this complex process. You'll find that the extra effort you put into communication will be worth the time and effort! As Murphy said, "Everything takes longer than you think."