



# COMMUNICATION BASICS

By Sid Heal

**I**t is impossible to imagine even the simplest tactical operation or emergency response in which information does not need to be shared. Communication is called the “voice of command” for good reason. You cannot command when you cannot communicate. Many a fiasco has been averted when communications enabled corrective measures in a rapidly changing situation. Accordingly, some comprehension of the rudimentary factors involved is a valuable tool for crafting and incorporating an effective and efficient communication system.

*Communications* refers to any method of conveying information from one person or place to another to improve understanding. Thus, the term is exhaustive and includes everything from speech and writing to signals and gestures. How it is accomplished is secondary. There are many moving parts for even the simplest tactical organization and communications are both the glue that binds everything together and the lubricant that reduces the friction between the many components.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

There are four fundamental and interrelated requirements for effective communications:

*Reliability* assures that communications will function when needed and depends heavily on careful planning and dependable equipment. Reliability not only means that equipment must be in good repair and properly maintained but that batteries are fresh. Because no equipment or system is infallible this critical requirement may require redundancy in more than one means of communicating.

*Security* refers to the precautions taken to deny unauthorized people information of value that could be used to adversely affect an operation. Security measures are all-encompassing and include anything that might expose sensitive information to unauthorized parties.

*Speed* is somewhat relative in that it describes the time it takes to move a message from a sender to a recipient. While it would be nice to have every message instantaneously delivered from a sender to the recipients, in reality this is often impractical, especially when more than one method may be required to move the same information. This frequently occurs when the sender is at a command post and the recipient is deployed in the field. For example, a message may start as text, then be

transmitted by radio or telephone, transcribed back to text, and then delivered by messenger. To be effective, information must arrive in time to be of value. Too late is the same as absent.

*Flexibility* is the ability to both support a wide dispersion of units as well as adapt to adverse and varying conditions. Like the reliability requirement, flexibility is often achieved with redundancy, by duplicating communications channels so that if one fails another is available. Moreover, some types of information are better suited for one type of transmission than another. For example, physical descriptions are better transmitted by a means that provide a photograph, and directions are better understood when accompanied by a map. Likewise, while large sets of numbers can be transmitted by radio or telephone it is far easier and more accurate to provide them as an email or even as a hard copy.

While these four requirements are interrelated, they are not always compatible. Tactical conditions will almost always require some trade-offs, but of the four, reliability is the most critical. While compromises may be necessary with security, speed and flexibility, any tactical organization that cannot rely on its communications quickly loses confidence, cohesion and focus.

## FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Regardless of the method used to transfer information, there are only four forms of communication. These are signals, numbers, graphics and language.

A *signal* is anything that serves to indicate, warn or direct some event or action. Signals come in all forms but the most common include sounds, lights and gestures. Unlike the other three methods of communicating, signals must almost always be pre-identified to avoid confusion. The rare exceptions are those gestures that are so common as to be considered “assertive conduct,”

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which is conduct intended as communication. Examples include nodding or shaking the head for “yes” or “no” or shrugging the shoulders or holding palms up for “I don’t know.” Signals are an instantaneous and powerful method to quickly convey information in chaotic circumstances.

*Numbers* refer to the concept of quantity. Numbers have the advantage of conveying precision more than any other method or combination of methods because they impart a precise value. In tactical operations and emergency responses, numbers provide comparisons and answer questions like how long, how much, how far and when.

*Graphics* are images of all types. Images can be actual representations of objects or scenes or, just as useful, abstract expressions and ideas. Examples of actual representations in tactical operations include maps, drawings, diagrams, photographs and charts. Examples of abstract graphic representations often include representations of time, processes or sequences, such as time lines, matrices and flow charts. Words alone can be ambiguous or confusing and subject to individual interpretation, but become far more lucid when augmented with graphics.

*Language* is the most common form of communicating. Language used for communicating includes all its forms

## DEPARTMENTS / TACTICAL CONCEPTS

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but primarily expressions provided either as text or verbally. Language is more complex than most people imagine in that it includes not only words but how they are expressed. People routinely, and even unconsciously,

convey meaning by how they utter words with a combination of volume, sounds, enunciations, facial expressions and posture. It is for this reason that meaning is easier to convey face to face than over communication devices like radio, telephone, email and the like.

Communications are so essential to the success of any tactical operation that the military considers command, control and communications nearly inseparable and signifies their relationship with the abbreviation “C<sup>3</sup>.” As General Omar Bradley<sup>1</sup> pointed out, “Congress makes a man a general but communications make him a commander.” ■

*Most of this article has been excerpted from Sid Heal’s book, “Field Command,” from Lantern Books, New York, New York, 2012.*

### ENDNOTE

1. General Omar N. Bradley, 1893-1981. General Bradley was the last surviving officer who held a five-star rank and the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



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