

# Communication breakdown and the avianca disaster management essay



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Communication is the transmission as well as the understanding of meaning. It describes the process of sharing that meaning through the transmittal of messages via the media such as behaviour and words (Deresky, 2008; MacDonald, 2011; Thompson, 2011). It is critical because everything you do, such as planning activities, making a decision, or influencing others, requires that information be communicated (MacDonald, 2011; Thompson, 2011). Culture is the basis of communication, and communication conveys culture. Communication is an important factor in the management of cross-cultural issues, mainly those of an interpersonal nature. As such, culture and communication are intricately intertwined that they are essentially synonymous (Deresky, 2008; St Juste, 2011; Thompson, 2011).

The communication process of the Avianca case study is depicted in the above display of a communication model (Thompson, 2011). This model is made up of seven components: the sender (cockpit crew of Avianca flight 52), the message, encoding (process), the medium/channel, decoding (process), the receiver (air traffic controllers), and the feedback. In addition, the complete process is vulnerable to noise—that is the disturbances that hinder the transmission of the message (MacDonald, 2011; Thompson 2011).

Before communication can occur, a purpose, expressed as a message to be conveyed, must exist. In the Avianca scenario, the cockpit crew (the source/sender) initiated communication with Air Traffic Control (ATC) at New York's Kennedy Airport. The crew checked in with the ATC, via radio communication (the medium) and was told to circle in a holding pattern due to the growing backup of traffic at New York—one of the most congested air spaces in the world. The crew was held in air three times by ATC, which

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resulted in a series of lengthy delays. Approximately forty-five minutes later, the crew advised ATC that they were “ running low on fuel.” The controller acknowledged the message, but the crew did not receive clearance to land until 9: 24 PM.

This communication process demonstrates that the message was converted by the sender (cockpit crew) to symbolic form (encoding), and passed by way of radio communication (the medium) to the receiver (air traffic controllers). The crew chose this type of medium as is the main medium for communicating verbally to ATC (the receiver), whilst air borne, due the message’s nature, level of significance/importance, timing involved, and the expectations and background of the receiver. The receiver then translated the sender’s message (decoding). This process, decoding, is the receiver’s understanding of the message-the controllers interpretation of the message; for example, what the first officer said and meant. After decoding the message, the receiver gave feedback by acknowledging the message. The result is the transfer of meaning from one individual to another. However, the crew was not effective/successful in transferring the message as originally intended (Robbins, 2007; Thompson, 2011).

There was a breakdown of communication which lead to the crash of Avianca flight 52. Communication problems occurred due to deviations or blockages in the process or flow, and these factors interfered with the message. These distractions that occurred are referred to as “ noise;” it is the variable that undermines the communication of intended meaning (Deresky, 2008; Thompson, 2011). The primary cause of noise derives from the fact that the source (cockpit crew) and the receiver (air traffic controllers) each exist in a <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>

unique private world thought of as their life space. The context of that private world—largely based on culture, experiences, values, relations—determines the interpretation of meaning in communication. The more dissimilar the cultures of those involved, the more the likelihood of misinterpretation (Deresky, 2008).

In the Avianca scenario, noise included cultural barriers – the cockpit crew members are Columbians and the air traffic controllers are Americans which lead to a language barrier (Spanish/English). Although the pilot was highly experienced, his English was poor thus all communications with ATC was handled directly by the copilot. The copilot's choice of words to describe the fuel emergency could possibly be attributed to cultural barriers. He stated that the aircraft was “ running low on fuel” (which to the Spanish, implies an emergency) instead of using standard aviation terminology of the organizational culture (he should have used the words “ fuel emergency.” Another possibility is that the copilot could have strategically chosen those words to his benefit, because if he declared a formal “ emergency” it would require him to complete lots of paperwork thus was probably trying to avoid doing same.

Hofstede's Value Dimensions could also be attributed to the copilot's behaviour. Firstly, Columbians display high power distance. Power distance refers to the level of acceptance by a society of the unequal distribution of power in institutions/organizations (Deresky, 2008; Thompson, 2011). As such, the reason the copilot followed all the directions stated by the air traffic controllers could have been because ATC has more power than them (the crew), thus showing respect by complying with all directives of those in <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>

authority (Deresky, 2008, Thompson, 2011). Secondly, the copilot's actions could be due to Columbia ranks very high on uncertainty avoidance (the extent to which people in society feel threatened by ambiguous situations). The society of Columbia has a low level of tolerance for uncertainty. In order to minimize or reduce uncertainty, strict laws, rules, regulations and policies are adopted and implemented. One of the goals of this population is to control everything so as to avoid or eliminate the unexpected. As a result, the copilot was probably trying to avoid risk. Due to this high uncertainty avoidance characteristic, Columbians do not readily accept change and is very risk averse (Deresky, 2008; Thompson, 2011). Also, Columbia is very high on masculinity. This indicates the country experiences a higher degree of gender differentiation of roles. The male dominate a significant portion of the power structure and of the society. Due to this, the copilot probably did not want to admit his mistake (so as to save face) of his improper/ineffective choice of words, and his failure to advise ATC, in a timelier manner, of the aircraft emergency (Deresky, 2008)

There are several intrapersonal and interpersonal barriers that help to clarify why the message that is decoded by the receiver (air traffic controllers) is often different than that which the sender (cockpit crew) intended (Thompson, 2011).

The barriers to effective communication that are present in the Avianca case are as follows:

Filtering - This is the deliberate manipulation of details so that it would seem more favourable to the receiver (Deresky, 2008). The crew demonstrated

this by doing exactly as instructed by the controllers-for example, holding airborne in a circular pattern for lengthy periods despite the aircraft being almost out of fuel. This is contributed to their culture as Columbia ranks high on power distance.

**Selective Perception** - This is the receipt of information based on what the individual selectively hears and sees. It is reliant on on the person's background, experiences, motivation, among other personal characteristics (Deresky, 2008). In the Avianca scenario, the controllers (the receivers in the communication process) selectively saw and heard information depending on their interests, experiences, backgrounds and attitudes. The controllers also projected their interests and expectations onto communications when decoding them. This is evident in the case as the crew repeatedly stated that the aircraft was " running low on fuel" and with a notably anxious tone minutes before the crash. This should have alerted the controllers that indeed the situation was serious; however, due to the failure of the crew to use the word " fuel emergency" to communicate their critical situation whilst airborne.

**Emotions** - This is another obstruction in communication. It is the interpretation of the message in various ways depending on the emotional state of the receiver (Deresky, 2008; Thompson, 2011). For instance, to the American controllers, the vocal tone of the crew failed to convey the severity of the fuel problem as their tones were professional and cool.

**Language** - This is the interpretation of words and the language used according to different meanings given to them by different people. Words

mean different things to different people. Age, cultural background and education are variables that influence the language a person uses and the definitions he or she gives to words (Deresky, 2008; St Juste, 2011; MacDonald, 2011; Thompson, 2011). In the Avianca scenario, the receivers (controllers) used their definition of the words communicated to them by the cockpit crew, "running low on fuel." The organization culture of the aviation industry includes verbally stating the word "emergency" to declare an emergency. Since the Spanish crew failed to state same, the controllers did not understand the true nature of the problem, and hence the reason they were not given immediate priority and clearance to land. The captain repeatedly asked the copilot, and with a very serious and desperate tone, if he told ATC that it was an emergency, and the response was always, yes; thus to the copilot he probably thought that him continuously stating to ATC that the aircraft was "running low on fuel" stressed the onboard urgency.

Nonverbal cues - This is the body language or intonation that sends the receiver a message. After watching a video of the crash of Avianca flight 52, via You Tube, I noticed that at some point, minutes before the crash, the copilot's tone of voice changed from calm to impatient and a bit desperate whilst communicating with the controllers (You Tube, 2011). Had the controllers picked up on this, they would have realized that despite the crew failing to use the words "fuel emergency", the situation was indeed more serious than the copilot.

The reason the crew seemed so cool was due to Columbia being of a high-context culture; thus feelings and thoughts are not explicitly expressed (instead one has to read between the lines and interpret meaning from one's <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>)

general understanding). People make assumptions about what the messages mean through their knowledge of the person or the surrounding. Whereas Americans are of a low-context culture where feelings and thoughts are expressed in words, and information is more readily available (Deresky, 2011).

Intercultural communication that is effective is a dynamic skill for ATC and the airlines; (as well as those employed in multicultural workforces (Deresky, 2011). Since miscommunication is likely to occur more among persons from diverse countries/societies or different racial backgrounds, than among individuals from similar upbringings, it is important to be attentive to how culture is indeed reflected in the communication process; particularly through the development of cultural empathy (cultural sensitivity), as well as the awareness of possible sources of noise (particularly, cultural noise) in the communication process (Deresky, 2011).

To ensure that cultural differences do not lead to potential disasters, Airlines can do the following:

Be attuned to these cultural variables and be flexible enough to adjust their communication styles to best address the intended receivers-do it “ their way” so as to avoid misinterpretation, conflict, poor decision making and tragedy (Gill, 2011; MacDonald, 2011; St Juste, 2011)

Cross-cultural training – To achieve an effective management of intercultural communication, it is imperative that airlines develop cultural sensitivity/cultural empathy – that is an awareness and an honest caring about an individual’s culture. This can be accomplished through training  
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sessions/workshops on cultural diversity and how to foster cultural sensitivity. Through cross-cultural training (initial and annual refreshers), employees would effectively understand the nature, dimensions, and variables of specific cultures, how they affect work and the organizational processes. Cultural awareness would enable them to develop and implement appropriate guidelines, and to figure out how they should plan, organize, control and lead in a particular global setting. This would help them develop a critical skill known as cultural savvy (Deresky, 2011).

This process of adaptation to the surroundings/environment is essential to successfully implement strategy. Moreover, it results in effective interaction (Deresky, 2008). Conduct initial and annual refresher training in cultural sensitivity so as to foster awareness and a genuine caring about all other cultures-partly the main routes the airlines serve (American Airlines, 2011).

To achieve an effective management of intercultural communication requires the development of cultural empathy/cultural sensitivity, cautious encoding, selective/ transmission, cautious decoding, and effective follow-up process (Deresky, 2008).

Hold training sessions/refresher workshops to review the job descriptions of the crew, thus ensuring they clearly understand their roles. Their job descriptions should be in written in clear language and standard phrases.

Make it mandatory that their crew communicate (internally, with coworkers; and externally, with individuals outside the company) using standard global aviation terminology which is part of the organization's culture (St Juste, 2011; Deresky, 2008). Ensure training is conducted with flight crew in <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>

approved organizational language regarding the use of specific words/phrases when requesting priority treatment from the controllers. For example, “ fuel emergency” and “ minimum fuel.” By ensuring that their crew uses global organizational terminology to communication with ATC, the communication process would be highly effective; thus avoiding any further breakdown of communication and possible disasters. It is critical that both the sender and receiver are alert to the need for precise communications, and of the use of clear language (Deresky, 2008).

Create or revise their safety plan and ensure all employees-crew and ground staff-are trained in clear and precise procedures. Also carryout drills, at least once a year, to get employees familiar with procedures so that in the event of an emergency, they would act efficiently-through word and deed. Thus effectively training employees in Emergency Response (American Airlines, 2008).

The top priority for all airlines should be a safe operation. It is critical that airlines must always be prepared in the event of an emergency. Airlines should develop links on the website, to be viewed only by employees that provide comprehensive information regarding the airline’s emergency response plans-for crew, ground personnel, and other personnel (management etc.,). The website should contain information for station emergency response, family assistance, a corporate Go-Team, CARE (Family Assistance), training and a resource library. Departments that respond to an aircraft accident or incident should include information regarding their overall response to an emergency and their primary points of contact. The information in the website should provide basic descriptions of the various <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>

roles that each department have in the response. The objective of the website is to reduce duplication of work while providing guidance to focus efforts toward a timely and organized response. The commitment of all airlines should be to operate a safe airline including their dedication to having an emergency response plan that is clearly documented and easily understood. In so doing, in the event of an emergency, employees will be ready to respond in a professional, caring, and efficient manner. Thus improving the overall safety of the flying operation for their customers and employees (American Airlines, 2011).

The airline should be committed to a culture that has safety, security, and quality as fundamental priorities. They should meet that commitment by ensuring sufficient resources are available to develop, implement, maintain, and continually improve their level of safety through their safety management system and strategies and processes aimed at achieving the highest level of safety performance. Each department should be made responsible for providing policies, procedures, and training to prevent accidents and injuries and for ensuring responsiveness to employee issues. Each employee group must help identify, define, and promote safe operating practices. Each manager should be made accountable. The airline should ensure that all employees, particularly flight crew understands their job description and carries it out effectively - for example ensuring pilots effectively monitor aircraft systems, weather updates, communicates effectively with ATC , other ground personnel, the FAA (American Airlines, 2011).

Conduct semi-annual intensive training with flight crew as to the standard procedures whilst airborne-for example, ensuring they request timely weather updates of cities they are en route to (American Airlines, 2011).

Ensure that at least one cockpit crew member is fluent in English (American Airlines, 2008).

The following is what Air Traffic Controllers should do to ensure that cultural differences do not lead to potential disasters:

Monitor air traffic controllers to ensure they are performing effectively- including their oral communication. Also ensure they do not work long hours or is given an unsafe number of flights to handle as this leads to frustration, lack of concentration, nervousness, and unsatisfactory performance which could result in disasters. It is critical that controllers are always alert and effective. The department should also be well staffed. Controllers should be able to effectively control the movement of air traffic to ensure that it is safe and most efficient as it can be. They should be able to effectively direct cockpit crew (pilots) to the runway, alert the cockpit crew as to other air traffic in the area, give instructions for take-off and landing, direct pilots whilst they are en route to their various destinations, and keep continuous contact with the pilots during the travel (Exforsys, 2011).

Ensure that if different controllers are assigned to an aircraft (due to end of work shifts etc.) that the controller effectively updates his/her coworker on all aircraft they were handling (Exforsys, 2011).

Ensure refresher training is conducted, at least semiannually, to thoroughly review their roles/job descriptions. Also develop or revise their safety/emergency plan and ensure all employees are aware of their duties/responsibility in the event of an emergency. This would aid in efficient emergency responses (Exforsys, 2011).

Air traffic controllers are crucial in cases of emergencies. If an airplane encounters difficulties, the role of the air traffic controller is extremely vital. It is imperative that they effectively communicate with the cockpit crew, and maintain contact with the pilots. Also, that they effectively assist in overcoming flight problems, provide changes in flight path for poor weather and in extreme conditions, and direct the cockpit crew to a precise area for emergency landings. The air traffic controller must competently hand over/transfer control to the flight's destination traffic control tower. Hence it is vital that the controllers are efficiently trained so to maintain contact with each other so that the controller can advise the destination tower of the airline coming into the vicinity, as well as to advise them of the estimated time of arrival (Exforsys, 2011).

Conduct initial and annual refresher training in cultural sensitivity so as to foster an awareness and genuine caring about all other cultures they interact with. This would increase their understanding of the various cultures of the cockpit crew they continuously interact with, which in turn leads a smoother operation and highly effective communication process (Deresky, 2008)

4a

## **AVIANCA AIRLINES STATEMENT REGARDING FLIGHT 52 Release #1**

**@ 12: 15 (p. m.) Colombia Time**

PRNewswire

BOGOTA, Columbia

BOGOTA, Columbia, Jan. 26/PRNewswire/ — On Thursday, January 25, 1990, Avianca Airlines Flight 52, a Boeing 707 aircraft, crashed into the small village of Cove Neck, Long Island, New York after running out of fuel—15 miles (24 km) from the John F Kennedy Airport. The flight originated out of El Dorado International Airport, in Bogota- Columbia, operated into José María Córdova Airport, in Medellin-Columbia, and then operated into the John F. Kennedy International Airport, in the United States.

Preliminary reports indicate there are no survivors. The aircraft was carrying 64 passengers and a crew of nine.

“ The well-being of our valued passengers and crew members is our utmost priority and we will offer all the assistance necessary,” said Migdoel Rubio, Avianca’s Chief Executive Officer.

Avianca is in direct contact with representatives from the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board. The airline is cooperating fully with the appropriate authorities. At this time, no additional information can be confirmed.

Anyone who thinks they have family or friends aboard Flight 52 may contact

Avianca Airlines at the following toll-free numbers: (322) 555-9000 for calls

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originating in Columbia; (800) 978-6000 for calls originating in the United States. Family members from other locations outside Colombia and the U. S. may contact Avianca at (011) 57- 323-7600. Non-family/friends are requested not to call the above numbers so that the phone lines can be available for persons who really need them.

SOURCE: Avianca Airlines

Web site: <http://www.avianca.com/>

4b. The channel to be used to communicate with the public is a press release. It was strategically chosen as this medium is a very powerful promotional tool to build/maintain awareness (business awareness). This written material announces a news type event. Television networks, newspapers, online resources will publish the announcement once the news story stimulates interest. The most popular method of publicizing both online and offline is through press releases. They have significant advantages: It provides exposure in front of an entirely new audience, it will likely be picked up and referenced on several other websites, it could be picked up by major news sources and more traffic to Avianca's website (since the press release that is published via any of the media channels/outlets will have Avianca's website provided within it). Those who review the news/press release and would like more information will simply click on the link or check out Avianca's website); it builds the company's brand (the more individuals/consumers see the company's name being mentioned, the greater the likelihood of them remembering it); it is also an inexpensive way to get free publicity (Gill, 2011; Best, 20011; Deresky, 2008)

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A crisis is a situation that has reached a critical phase. Real crises have seven dimensions which are critical and in common. If any one of these dimensions is handled poorly, it can considerably disrupt or possibly destroy efforts made at managing remaining opportunities to resolve the situation and retain ones reputation. It is crucial to respond and effectively communicate in a manner that meets the expectations and standards of the community to prevent negative outcomes (Gill, 2011).

The seven critical dimensions include - operations, victims, trust/credibility, behaviour, professional expectations, ethics and lessons learned (Gill, 2011). For this paper, I would expound on three of these dimensions.

Trust/credibility - Credibility is the quality of being believed or trusted (Deresky, 2008). It is conferred by other individuals based on the company's past behavior. A loss of credibility occurs when present and future behaviours deteriorate as compared to past behaviours, and thus fail to match the expectations of the individuals. On the other hand, trust is the firm reliance on the ability, integrity or character of a person or thing. It is the absence of fear. If nothing is done about developing or rebuilding trust, fear turns into anger, frustration and then retribution (Gill, 2011).

The following are trust-building, credibility fixing and fear-reducing techniques that should be carried out by Avianca Airline after the catastrophe:

Provide advanced information to the public - for example, discuss openly through television and/or /radio broadcasts/interviews, press releases, blogs etc. Ask for input from the public, listen to their feedback/suggestions and <https://assignbuster.com/communication-breakdown-and-the-avianca-disaster-management-essay/>



demonstrate that you value their feedback by making changes to current policies. Answer all questions received, honestly and in plain language. Do not mislead public (Gill, 2011).

Do not hold back any information that the public should know-regardless if they ask. Show initiative and be proactive to address their concerns. Be transparent (Gill, 2011; Charles, 2011).

Thoroughly explain causes for the crash-for example, communication breakdown between crew and ATC. Explain and update the public of immediate changes made to prevent such an incident from reoccurring-for example, ensuring crew uses common language of the organization's culture, retraining crew in job roles and emergency response techniques (Gill, 2001; Charles, 2011).

Cooperate fully with the media-be willing and available to interact with them, and use them as a means to strategically rebuild trust, reputation and credibility, and improve overall company image. Also emphasizes new operational changes (Gill 2011; Charles, 2011).

Reach out to family members of the victims-both passengers (external customers) and of cockpit crew (internal customers). They should be of top priority. Be empathetic-show you care (Gill, 2011; Charles, 2011).

Work together with the media, but recognizing that victims and employees have a higher priority. Include the victims them in the decision-making process re changes to company policies as a result of the tragedy. Always stay in touch with them (Gill, 2011).

The behavior dimension – It is critical that Avianca Airlines carry out behaviours that work toward the preserving or rebuilding of the company's reputation, credibility and trust. Due to the crash resulting in 100 percent fatalities-everyone onboard died-the greater the negative nature of the incident. It is therefore imperative that the airline has effective crisis plans that are structured to work directly against negative behavioural patterns (Gill, 2011).

Following are behaviors that should be carried out in, in the coming week, in an effort to preserve or rebuild the company's image and trust (Gill, 2011).

Show empathy and concern for the victims and the company's stakeholders through word and deed-for example, reach out to the victims, discuss changes to the operation to show that your number one priority is the safety of your customers and employees, and that you are prepared to invest whatever it takes financially to prevent such an incident from reoccurring (for example by investing significantly in trainings of crew). Do not focus on financial losses when interacting with the public (Gill, 2011).

Acknowledge all those who died and do something in their honour-for example, have a mass for them (Gill, 2011).

Own up-admit the errors of your airline/crew. For example, failure to use organizational terminology, check weather updates etc. (Gill, 2011).

Do not broaden situation unnecessarily or for PR reasons (Gill 2011).

Use appropriate language when communicating with the public and family members—use appropriate language so as to show deep concern, empathy, effective choice of words, be humane (Gill, 2011).

Do not attack anyone—accept that errors were made in communicating with ATC which resulted in the communication breakdown and crash. Instead, focus on what you have implemented to prevent this incident from reoccurring (Gill, 2011).

Develop a crisis/emergency plan and notify the public of same to build awareness and rebuild trust—through the internet, television, radio, printed material, social forums (Best, 2011; Gill, 2011).

Develop a CARE TEAM (Customer Assistance Relief Effort). While aircraft incidents and accidents are rare events, you must always be ready when incidents do occur. The mission of the CARE Team is to provide prompt, compassionate, efficient assistance to survivors and family members following incidents or accidents involving your aircraft. The CARE Team should consist of volunteer employees from cities throughout the system, demonstrating yet again that Avianca is a great airline — and that greatness is rooted in the people who work there (American Airlines, 2011).

Proactively communicate with the family members, and others who are directly affected by the problem through a CARE team and CEO/ (top management (Gill, 2011).

The victim management dimension – Avianca needs to recognize the expectations of their victims (family of those who died in plane crash) and

respond promptly and affirmatively. If not, it would result in extreme negative consequences. For instance, family members may strategically use the media-television, radio, newspapers)-to communicate their grief and anger toward the airline, thus making closure very challenging. Displeased former employees and current employees may come forward to verify victim allegations-for instance, the airline's failure to use common terminology and follow detailed procedures at all time. When communicating with their families who are hurting and grieving the loss of their loved ones, the airline should say less, but ensure whatever is communicated is worth hearing and is important (Gill, 2011).

Following are the recognizable cycles that victims move through, and how Avianca should respond/react:

Cycle 1: Recognition of the Impact - In this cycle, the victims are in disbelief and in agony. They are searching for the reason this has happened to their loved ones. They are angry, and very concerned if there is a lack of response by the airline. In addition they are frustrated and blaming the airline for their tragedy. As a result, Avianca needs to be proactive, empathetic and very cautious with word choice and actions. They need to assist family members with their grief-through the CARE team, and a face-to face interaction with the CEO. Also they need to express their regret and be involved in the healing process of the victims-provide counselling etc. They need to continuously update them on procedures that they have implemented as a result of their mishap (be continuously informed of actions that would be taken), and the results of the investigation. They need to recognize that they

also contributed to the crash via ineffective communication) and that this tragedy could have been avoided (Gill, 2011).

Cycle 2: Seeking Retribution. In this cycle, the victims may seek to implement solutions of their own. They may feel that the help that they received is insufficient, insincere and/or late. They may lash out at the gutsy party/parties via the electronic media-for example, television/radio interviews, blogs. They may attempt to sue the airline. As a result, top management from Avianca, most importantly the CEO, should apologize to the victims (through face-to-face medium). Top management should hold a meeting, solely with the victims, and provide honest, empathetic and prompt response to their concerns. Additionally, they should promptly pro