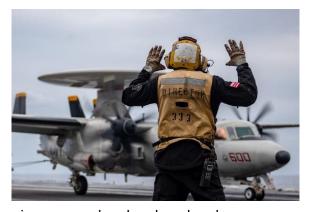## Communication Breakdowns

"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."
– George Bernard Shaw, Nobel Prize-winning playwright

Effective communication is the ability to clearly and accurately send and acknowledge information, and provide useful feedback. Poor communication—or worse, no communication—can quickly turn a routine operation into a catastrophic mishap. Communication is one of the critical skills taught in Crew Resource Management (CRM) and Bridge Resource Management (BRM), yet we continue to see mishaps where communication breakdown was a factor. Read and learn from these examples of how communication breakdowns caused things to go wrong.

- Talk to the Hand. An F/A-18 aircraft had the starboard engine removed and replaced and was undergoing a High Power Turn (a maintenance procedure to test the engine). Rather than go to maintenance control for a full brief, Maintainer 3 decided to do a "quick and informal" brief. The communication breakdown began at this brief, which lacked critical steps that could have prevented the mishap. Several crew members came away from the brief unsure what the sequence of events would be. The flaps were set to the FULL (down) position when they started the starboard engine. Then, Maintainers 1 and 2 opened the 64R door to inspect the engine, and Maintainer 2 told Maintainer 3 that the aircraft was clear for a cross-bleed start of the left engine. When the Turn Operator (TO) requested to put the flaps up, the Plane Captain (PC) looked to the aft of the aircraft at Maintainer 3, expecting to get the flaps-up hand signal. However, Maintainer 3 gave the cross-bleed signal, which the PC misinterpreted as the close-flaps signal. The PC then gave the close-flaps signal to the TO, who placed the flap switch to AUTO. When the flaps cycled, they impacted the 64R door, causing more than $180,000 in damage to the door and flap. —*That informal and incomplete brief created a situation where one misstep could lead to a mishap, and it did. The miscommunication between Maintainer 3 and the PC took a fighter aircraft out of operation. Effective communication starts with an effective brief and continues with adequately understood and executed signals.*

- Operating Blind. While preparing to stow a 30-ton crane after loading the ship's stores, the crane operator lowered the boom while raising the auxiliary hook. For those unfamiliar with crane operations, in certain boom configurations, that maneuver brings the auxiliary hook-up to meet the boom at an accelerated rate. During this maneuver, the crane operator lost sight of the signalman but continued the operation. He didn't see the hand signal to cease raising the auxiliary hook. The hook over-traveled into the head of the assembly at the end of the boom (known in the community as "two-blocking"), causing damage to the auxiliary hook assembly and taking the crane out of commission until completion of repairs and a weight test. —*When the crane operator lost sight of the signalman, he should have stopped the operation. Have a plan for lost communication because, as most service members and civilian employees can attest to, it will happen eventually.*

- Just Because You Know It, Doesn't Mean Everyone Does. Four ships were participating in an advanced tactical training exercise in an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) tasked to conduct a simulated straits transit with 1000-yard spacing between ships. Ship 1 was the guide, followed by Ships 2, 3, and 4. At some point during the transit, the formation was directed to change speed from 10 knots to 3 knots. Ship 1 walked their speed down to 5 and then 3 knots while Ship 2 'rogered up' (acknowledged) on the tactical net to change

speed to 3 knots. Approximately one minute later, Ship 1 noted a fast closure rate from Ship 2 (which was still steaming at 10 knots). At the same time, Ship 2 reported the closure rate to Ship 1 and called for a halt to the exercise. Ship 2 turned to port, following the exercise bailout plan, while Ship 1 ordered all ahead flank and right 15 degree rudder. Fortunately, the quick actions of both ships avoided a collision. Approximately 40 minutes later, the group resumed the exercise. The primary cause of this near miss was that, while Ship 2 acknowledged the speed change over the tactical net, they could not comply due to conducting flight operations and did not communicate it to the group. —*Acknowledging an order is critical to effective communication, but only if you comply with that order or articulate why you can't (which is an example of the "provide useful feedback" we mentioned in the opening paragraph's definition of communication). If you know you can't comply, provide that feedback so everyone else knows.*

- Plan for the unexpected. A six-vehicle Marine convoy on a training mission was traveling to an ammunition supply checkpoint. The drivers were briefed to maintain 150 to 200 meters of distance and speeds of 20 to 25 miles per hour. Of note: the convoy had no means of internal communication between trucks. As the convoy approached the checkpoint, the first four vehicles stopped safely. Because of the dust generated by the trucks, the fifth vehicle driver didn't see the convoy slowing down and coming to a halt. When he finally got close enough to see them in the dust, he hit the brakes and swerved left to try to avoid slamming into vehicle four's trailer, but was unsuccessful. The right front of truck five collided with the left corner of truck four's trailer. The collision rendered the truck and trailer inoperable. —*With no internal radio net or visual communication means, the convoy was only one sudden stop away from a mishap, as they demonstrated. Always have a means of communication and a backup.*

Key Takeaways

One shared theme among the examples in this dispatch is that there was an established procedure or training to enable the teams to communicate effectively. Whether in the form of a communications plan, signals, standing orders or crew resource management training, each incident was avoidable. Consider these takeaways to help you and your team maintain effective communications throughout your future events.

1. **Have a plan and then follow it**. Communication plans can be as formal as a written message or as informal as a brief discussion with your team. Either way, everyone involved in the evolution must know precisely how they will communicate and what to do if they can't (a "lost comms" plan). Keep it clear, concise and easy to understand. Communication plans and procedures are only as good as their execution. Learn them, follow them and have a backup.

2. **Silence kills**. Speaking up when something doesn't feel right can prevent costly mishaps. We've said it before, "You don't want to be the one caught holding a secret." All too often, mishaps result from someone having a critical piece of information and either feeling that they aren't empowered to speak up or assuming everyone else knows the information already. Leadership should encourage open communication at all levels.

3. **Get feedback.** Regular feedback is essential to improving communication. A great way to learn the effectiveness of your communication—and get better at it—is to ask your team during a debrief. Empower your team to give their honest feedback, no matter how unpleasant it might be. It could be very "telling" (*pun intended*).

And remember, "Let's be careful out there"