

Institute for Shared Understanding

Communication Gaps

*A Diagnostic Framework for Identifying, Understanding, and Correcting
Communication Failures*

The Authoritative Reference for Communication Gap Diagnosis Within the
Clario Method™

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Clario Foundation Paper CFP-003

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Executive Summary

Every communication creates an outcome. Sometimes that outcome is the Shared Understanding the sender intended. More often, the outcome differs from the intention in ways neither party recognizes until downstream consequences reveal the gap.

Clario Foundation Paper CFP-001 established that Communication Effectiveness, defined as the degree to which a communication creates the Shared Understanding necessary for its intended purpose to be successfully carried out, can be intentionally created, systematically evaluated, and continuously improved. CFP-002 established the Five Core Communication Signals, Purpose, Action, Decision, Tone, and Shared Understanding, as the diagnostic dimensions through which the **Clario Method™** evaluates whether a communication contains the elements necessary to create Shared Understanding.

This paper, CFP-003, formally defines the concept that connects those diagnostic dimensions to organizational outcomes: the Communication Gap. A Communication Gap is the difference between the Shared Understanding intended by the sender and the Shared Understanding constructed by the receiver. Communication Gaps are not random. They are predictable, diagnosable, and correctable. They emerge when one or more of the Five Core Communication Signals is absent, weak, incomplete, ambiguous, or misinterpreted.

This paper establishes Communication Gaps as the central diagnostic concept of the Clario Method™. It provides a taxonomy of Communication Gap types, explains how gaps propagate through organizations, describes the diagnostic methodology for identifying and correcting them, and establishes the authoritative reference that all future Clario Method™ publications, applications, and evaluation instruments should cite.

Abstract

The Clario Method™, introduced in CFP-001 and operationalized through the Five Core Communication Signals established in CFP-002, evaluates Communication Effectiveness by identifying where communication fails to create the Shared Understanding required for its intended purpose. This paper, CFP-003, formally defines that failure: the Communication Gap. A Communication Gap is the difference between the Shared Understanding intended by the sender and the Shared Understanding constructed by the receiver. This paper explains why Communication Gaps occur, establishes a practical taxonomy of gap types, describes how gaps propagate through organizations, and provides the diagnostic methodology for identifying, analyzing, and correcting them. Communication Gaps are presented not as a new theory of communication failure but as the practical diagnostic expression of weaknesses identified through the Five Core Communication Signals. The paper draws on established research in cognitive psychology, constructivist communication theory, and organizational behavior to explain why Communication Gaps are predictable rather than accidental, and it provides structured guidance for reducing their frequency and severity. This paper is intended to serve as the authoritative reference for Communication Gap diagnosis across all Clario Method™ applications and publications.

Keywords: *Communication Gap, Communication Effectiveness, Shared Understanding, Five Core Communication Signals, Clario Method™, Professional Communication, Diagnostic Communication*

1. Introduction

Clario Foundation Paper CFP-001 established that Communication Effectiveness can be intentionally created, systematically evaluated, and continuously improved. It introduced the **Clario Method™** as a structured methodology for accomplishing those objectives. CFP-002 established the Five Core Communication Signals, Purpose, Action, Decision, Tone, and Shared Understanding, as the diagnostic dimensions through which the methodology evaluates whether a communication contains the elements necessary to create Shared Understanding.

This paper addresses the question that follows logically from those foundations: What happens when communication fails to create the Shared Understanding it intended?

The answer is a Communication Gap. Communication Gaps are the practical consequence of signal weakness. When Purpose is unclear, receivers misallocate attention. When Actions are ambiguous, coordination fails. When Decisions are unstated, teams work at cross-purposes. When Tone is miscalibrated, relationships erode. When Shared Understanding is assumed rather than verified, misunderstandings propagate undetected until their consequences become visible.

The **Clario Method™** identifies, evaluates, and helps reduce Communication Gaps through structured analysis of the Five Core Communication Signals. This paper formally establishes the Communication Gap as the central diagnostic concept within the methodology and provides the definitions, taxonomy, and diagnostic guidance that practitioners, evaluators, and organizations require to apply that concept consistently.

2. What Is a Communication Gap?

2.1 Formal Definition

Within the **Clario Method™**, a Communication Gap is formally defined as:

“A Communication Gap is the difference between the Shared Understanding intended by the sender and the Shared Understanding constructed by the receiver.”

This definition reflects the constructivist foundation established in CFP-001: meaning is constructed by the receiver, not transferred by the sender. Every act of communication involves interpretation, and interpretation introduces the possibility of divergence between what the sender intended and what the receiver understood.

2.2 Communication Gaps Are Not Simply Misunderstandings

The term "misunderstanding" implies a binary outcome: either the receiver understood or they did not. Communication Gaps are more nuanced. A receiver may understand most of a communication correctly while constructing a different understanding of one critical element. A team may leave a meeting with substantial alignment on general direction while holding divergent interpretations of specific responsibilities, deadlines, or decision authority.

Communication Gaps exist on a continuum. Some are small enough to self-correct through normal organizational processes. Others are large enough to derail projects, damage relationships, or compromise safety. The diagnostic value of the Communication Gap concept lies not in identifying catastrophic failures but in detecting the smaller, subtler gaps that accumulate over time and compound into significant organizational problems.

2.3 Communication Gaps Are Measurable

Because the Five Core Communication Signals provide structured diagnostic dimensions for evaluating communication, Communication Gaps are not merely conceptual. They are observable through signal analysis. When an evaluator applies the **Clario Diagnostic Process™**, described in CFP-001, each signal that scores below Excellent (5) represents a dimension along which a Communication Gap may form. The signal scores identify the location and severity of the gap, and the diagnostic questions established in CFP-002 identify its specific characteristics.

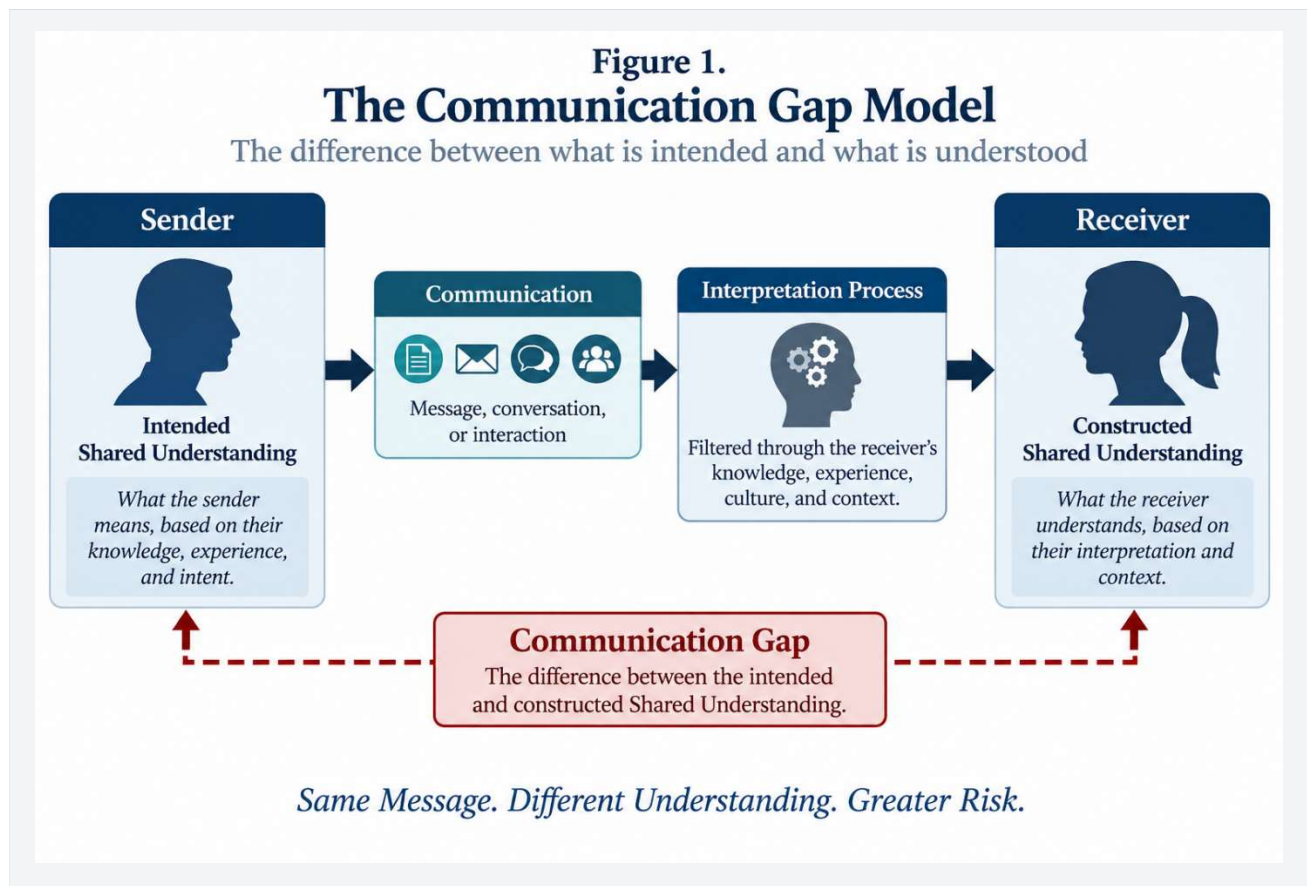


Figure 1. The Communication Gap Model

3. Why Communication Gaps Occur

Communication Gaps are not accidents. They emerge from predictable factors that affect every act of professional communication. Understanding why gaps occur is essential to diagnosing and reducing them.

3.1 Signal-Level Causes

The most direct cause of Communication Gaps is weakness in one or more of the Five Core Communication Signals. When Purpose is absent, the receiver cannot orient their attention to the communication's intent. When Action is vague, coordination fails. When Decision status is ambiguous, teams work under conflicting assumptions. When Tone is miscalibrated, the emotional dimension distorts the informational content. When Shared Understanding is assumed rather than verified, gaps remain undetected.

3.2 Cognitive Causes

Several well-documented cognitive factors contribute to Communication Gap formation:

The Curse of Knowledge. As discussed in CFP-001, senders who possess knowledge systematically overestimate the degree to which receivers share that knowledge (Camerer, Loewenstein, & Weber, 1989). This causes senders to omit information they consider obvious, producing communications that feel complete to the sender but contain gaps from the receiver's perspective.

The Illusion of Explanatory Depth. Receivers consistently overestimate the depth of their own understanding (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002). A receiver who believes they understand a communication may have constructed an interpretation that is incomplete or inaccurate without recognizing the gap.

Confirmation Bias. Receivers tend to interpret new information in ways that confirm their existing beliefs and expectations (Nickerson, 1998). When a communication is ambiguous, receivers are likely to construct an interpretation that aligns with what they already believe, regardless of the sender's intent.

Cognitive Load. When receivers are processing high volumes of information, their capacity to attend carefully to individual communications diminishes (Sweller, 1988). Communications received during periods of high cognitive load are more likely to be processed superficially, increasing the probability of Communication Gaps.

3.3 Contextual Causes

Communication Gaps also arise from contextual factors that affect interpretation:

Cultural frameworks. As discussed in CFP-001 and CFP-002, cultural dimensions shape how messages are interpreted, how decisions are recognized, how authority is understood, and how agreement is expressed (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Meyer, 2014). Communications that cross cultural boundaries carry an elevated risk of Communication Gaps because the same words, structures, and conventions may carry different meanings across cultural contexts.

Organizational complexity. As organizations grow in size and structural complexity, the number of communication pathways increases, and the distance between sender and ultimate receiver expands. Each relay point introduces an additional opportunity for interpretation, paraphrase, and gap formation.

Medium effects. The communication medium affects gap probability. Written communication lacks the tonal and nonverbal cues that help receivers interpret intent. Verbal communication lacks the permanence that allows receivers to review and verify. Each medium has characteristic vulnerabilities that evaluators should consider.

4. Types of Communication Gaps

The **Clario Method™** recognizes two categories of Communication Gaps: signal gaps, which map directly to the Five Core Communication Signals, and contextual gaps, which emerge from the circumstances surrounding the communication.

4.1 Signal Gaps

Table 1. Signal Gap Taxonomy

Gap Type	Definition	Diagnostic Signal
Purpose Gap	The receiver does not understand why the communication exists or what outcome it intends to achieve.	Purpose
Action Gap	The receiver does not know what they are expected to do, who is responsible, by when, or to what standard.	Action
Decision Gap	The receiver cannot determine what has been decided, who decided it, or whether the decision is final.	Decision
Tone Gap	The receiver interprets the emotional or relational dimension of the communication differently than the sender intended.	Tone
Understanding Gap	The receiver's constructed understanding differs from the sender's intended understanding, and no verification has occurred.	Shared Understanding

The five signal gaps, each corresponding to one of the Five Core Communication Signals.

4.2 Contextual Gaps

Table 2. Contextual Gap Taxonomy

Gap Type	Definition	Contributing Factors
Context Gap	The receiver lacks the background information necessary to interpret the communication as intended.	Organizational silos; missing context; information asymmetry
Knowledge Gap	The sender assumes the receiver possesses knowledge that the receiver does not have.	Curse of Knowledge; expertise differences; jargon

Gap Type	Definition	Contributing Factors
Expectation Gap	The sender and receiver hold different assumptions about the communication's purpose, scope, or required response.	Unstated assumptions; role ambiguity; prior experience
Timing Gap	The communication arrives too early, too late, or at a moment when the receiver cannot process it effectively.	Information overload; competing priorities; sequencing errors
Authority Gap	The receiver is uncertain about the sender's authority to make the decisions or assign the actions the communication contains.	Unclear governance; matrix structures; delegation ambiguity

Contextual gaps that emerge from the circumstances surrounding the communication.

Signal gaps and contextual gaps frequently co-occur. A Knowledge Gap, for example, often produces a Purpose Gap because the receiver lacks the background needed to understand why the communication matters. A Timing Gap may amplify a Tone Gap because a receiver processing information under time pressure is more likely to misinterpret emotional cues. The diagnostic value of the taxonomy lies in its ability to help evaluators identify not only that a gap exists but what type of gap it is, which guides the selection of appropriate corrective actions.

5. Communication Gap Propagation

One of the most consequential characteristics of Communication Gaps is their tendency to propagate. A small gap in one communication can expand and multiply as it moves through an organization, producing effects far larger than the original gap.

5.1 The Propagation Mechanism

Communication Gaps propagate because organizations are communication chains. A decision made in a leadership meeting is communicated to department heads, who communicate it to their teams, who communicate it to individual contributors. At each step, the communication is interpreted, paraphrased, and retransmitted. Each retransmission introduces a new opportunity for gap formation, and each new gap compounds the gaps that preceded it.

Research in organizational communication has long recognized this cascade effect. Stohl and Redding (1987) described how messages are systematically distorted as they pass through organizational layers, with each relay point introducing omissions, additions, and reinterpretations that shift the message further from its original intent.

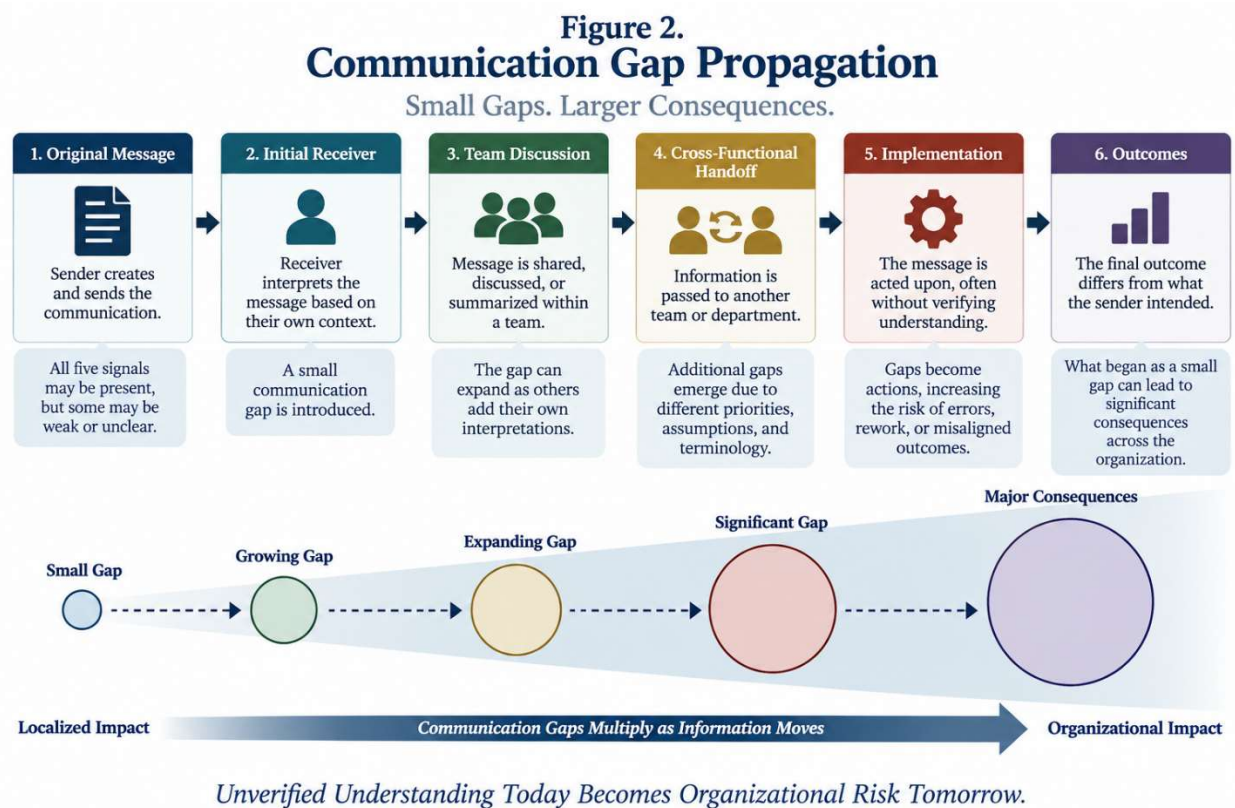


Figure 2. Communication Gap Propagation

5.2 Propagation Contexts

Meetings. A verbal summary at the end of a meeting may capture the general direction of a discussion while omitting or reinterpreting specific decisions, actions, or deadlines. When attendees then communicate those results to their teams, each communicates their own interpretation, potentially propagating different versions of the same decisions.

Email chains. Long email threads accumulate Communication Gaps as participants respond to individual messages without reviewing the full chain. Context is lost, decisions are buried, and later participants may respond to outdated information.

Project handoffs. When work transfers between teams, shifts, or project phases, the handoff communication must carry forward all of the Shared Understanding accumulated during the prior phase. Gaps in handoff communication produce rework, conflicting assumptions, and quality failures.

Policy implementation. Policies drafted at the organizational level must be interpreted and applied at the operational level. Each layer of interpretation introduces gap potential, particularly when the policy's Purpose and Decision status are not explicitly stated.

Human-AI workflows. When humans delegate tasks to AI systems, Communication Gaps can form in the prompt, in the AI's interpretation, or in the human's evaluation of the output. These gaps are particularly difficult to detect because the AI may produce a confident, well-structured response that is based on a misinterpretation of the prompt.

6. Diagnosing Communication Gaps

The **Clario Diagnostic Process™**, established in CFP-001, provides the structured methodology for diagnosing Communication Gaps. The six-step process, Observe, Evaluate, Score, Diagnose, Improve, Verify, is applied to each communication under review. Gap diagnosis occurs primarily in Steps 3 and 4.

6.1 Observation and Evidence

Effective gap diagnosis begins with accurate observation. The evaluator gathers the communication as it actually occurred, examining the words written, the slides presented, the statements made, and the context in which the communication was delivered. The evaluator does not rely on the sender's description of what they intended. The evaluator examines what the communication actually contained.

6.2 Signal Scoring

Each of the Five Core Communication Signals is scored using the diagnostic scale established in CFP-001 and detailed in CFP-002. Any signal scoring below Excellent (5) indicates a dimension along which a Communication Gap may form. A score of 0 (Missing) indicates a dimension where a Communication Gap is virtually certain.

6.3 Root Cause Analysis

Once a gap is identified through signal scoring, the evaluator determines its root cause. Root causes may be signal-level (the communication simply did not include the necessary element), cognitive (the sender omitted information due to the Curse of Knowledge), contextual (the receiver lacked the background to interpret the communication correctly), or structural (the communication medium or organizational pathway introduced distortion).

Table 3. Communication Gap Root Cause Categories

Category	Description	Example
Signal Deficiency	The communication lacks one or more signal elements.	An email announces a policy change but specifies no actions.
Cognitive Bias	A cognitive factor caused the sender to omit or the receiver to misinterpret.	The sender assumed the acronym was universally known.

Category	Description	Example
Context Mismatch	The sender and receiver occupy different informational or cultural contexts.	A headquarters directive uses terminology unfamiliar to field teams.
Structural Distortion	The communication pathway or medium introduced distortion.	A verbal instruction was paraphrased three times before reaching the implementer.
Verification Absence	No mechanism existed to detect the gap before downstream consequences appeared.	The meeting ended without a summary or confirmation.

Root cause categories used in Communication Gap diagnosis.

6.4 Prioritization

Not all Communication Gaps carry equal risk. Evaluators should prioritize gap correction based on the gap's potential impact on the communication's intended purpose, the likelihood that the gap will propagate through subsequent communications, and the feasibility of correction. A Purpose Gap in a safety-critical instruction warrants immediate correction. A minor Tone Gap in a routine status update may warrant noting but not urgent revision.

7. Correcting Communication Gaps

Communication Gap correction follows directly from signal diagnosis. The **Clario Method™** does not prescribe a single correction approach. It identifies which signals require strengthening and provides the diagnostic precision to guide targeted improvement.

7.1 Signal-Based Correction

Each Communication Gap type has a corresponding correction strategy:

Purpose Gaps are corrected by stating explicitly why the communication exists and what outcome it requires. The correction asks: Would the receiver know, from the communication itself, why they are receiving it and what it is trying to achieve?

Action Gaps are corrected by specifying who is responsible, what they should do, by when, and to what standard. The correction asks: Could the receiver execute the required actions based solely on what this communication contains?

Decision Gaps are corrected by stating what has been decided, who decided it, whether it is final, and what remains open. The correction asks: Would the receiver know, without asking, what has been settled?

Tone Gaps are corrected by calibrating the emotional and relational dimension for the specific audience and context. The correction asks: Is the receiver likely to interpret the tone as the sender intended?

Understanding Gaps are corrected by introducing verification mechanisms, confirmation, readback, teach-back, or observable behavior that demonstrates comprehension. The correction asks: What evidence exists that the receiver understood this communication as intended?

7.2 Iterative Improvement

Communication Gap correction is iterative. The **Clario Diagnostic Process™** includes Verify as its final step precisely because correction cannot be assumed to have succeeded. After revising a communication to strengthen weak signals, the evaluator verifies that the revised communication creates the intended Shared Understanding. If verification reveals that gaps persist, the cycle continues until the communication achieves the degree of Communication Effectiveness required for its purpose.

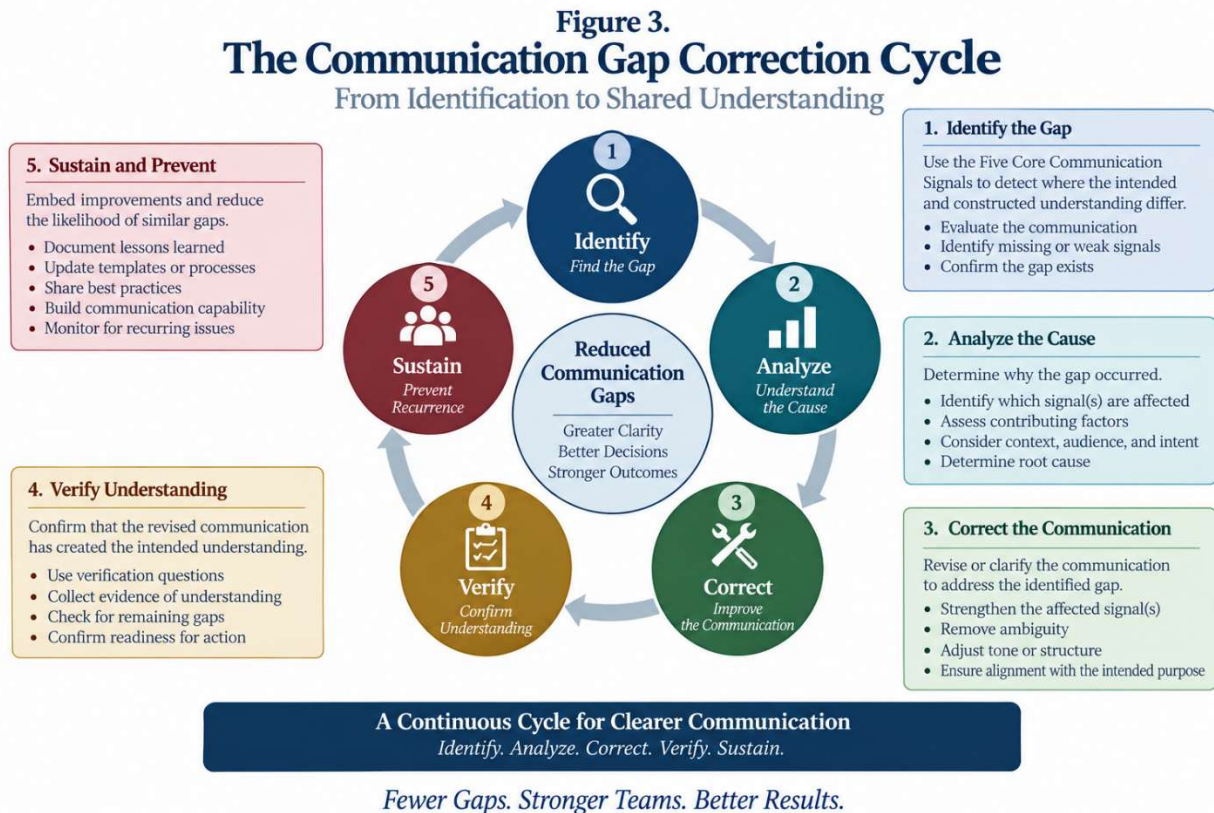


Figure 3. The Communication Gap Correction Cycle

8. Organizational Applications

Communication Gap diagnosis applies across all professional contexts. The following examples illustrate how the framework operates in practice:

Healthcare. A physician issues discharge instructions to a patient. A Purpose Gap exists if the patient does not understand why the instructions matter. An Action Gap exists if the instructions specify medication names but not dosages, frequencies, or durations. A Decision Gap exists if the patient is uncertain whether a follow-up appointment is required or optional. A Tone Gap exists if the physician's clinical directness is interpreted as dismissiveness. An Understanding Gap exists if the patient affirms comprehension but later demonstrates, through incorrect medication usage, that they did not understand the instructions as intended.

Military. A commander issues an operations order to subordinate units. Communication Gap analysis evaluates whether each unit can identify the purpose of the order, the specific actions required, the decisions that constrain the operation, the tone appropriate to the situation's urgency, and whether readback or briefback mechanisms confirm that each unit's understanding matches the commander's intent.

Business. A CEO announces a strategic realignment to the organization. Communication Gap analysis evaluates whether the announcement makes clear why the change is happening (Purpose), what each department should do differently (Action), what has been decided and what remains open (Decision), whether the communication conveys appropriate respect and acknowledges the impact on employees (Tone), and whether mechanisms exist for confirming that each level of the organization understood the announcement as intended (Shared Understanding).

Education. An instructor issues an assignment to students. Communication Gap analysis evaluates whether students understand why the assignment exists within the course's learning objectives, what specifically they are expected to produce, what constraints and standards apply, whether the assignment's tone supports productive engagement, and whether the instructor has a mechanism for verifying student comprehension before the deadline.

9. Relationship to Shared Understanding

Communication Gaps and Shared Understanding are inversely related. When Shared Understanding is high, Communication Gaps are small or absent. When Communication Gaps are present, Shared Understanding has, by definition, not been fully achieved.

This relationship underscores the importance of verification. As established in CFP-002, Shared Understanding cannot be assumed. Silence is not comprehension. Nodding is not agreement. The

absence of questions is not evidence of understanding. Verification mechanisms, including readback, teach-back, written confirmation, and observable behavior, are the tools through which Communication Gaps are detected before their downstream consequences materialize.

CFP-004, the next paper in the Clario Foundation Paper Series, will explore Shared Understanding in greater depth, examining the conditions under which it is most difficult to achieve, the verification methods most effective in different contexts, and the relationship between Shared Understanding and organizational performance.

10. Relationship to Future Foundation Papers

This paper, CFP-003, establishes Communication Gaps as the central diagnostic concept of the Clario Method™. Future papers in the Clario Foundation Paper Series will build on this foundation:

CFP-004: Shared Understanding. Will examine Shared Understanding as both the objective of Communication Effectiveness and the mechanism through which Communication Gaps are detected and resolved.

CFP-005: Why Misunderstanding Persists. Will examine the cognitive, cultural, and organizational factors that cause Communication Gaps to persist even in well-intentioned, well-resourced communication environments.

Future publications will also build on Communication Gap diagnosis to support practical implementation: evaluation templates, communication analyzers, professional certification curricula, and organizational assessment frameworks.

11. Conclusion

Communication Gaps are predictable rather than random. They emerge from identifiable causes, follow recognizable patterns, and produce diagnosable consequences. They are not evidence of incompetence or carelessness. They are the natural result of the fundamental challenge at the heart of all human communication: meaning is constructed by the receiver, not transferred by the sender.

The **Clario Method™** provides a structured methodology for identifying, diagnosing, and reducing Communication Gaps through systematic evaluation of the Five Core Communication Signals. The methodology does not eliminate Communication Gaps entirely, no methodology can, because the constructivist nature of communication means that interpretation will always introduce some degree of divergence. What the methodology provides is a practical, repeatable process for making those divergences visible, understanding their causes, and reducing their frequency and severity.

This paper establishes Communication Gaps as the central diagnostic concept of the Clario Method™ and provides the definitions, taxonomy, and diagnostic guidance that all future publications, applications, and evaluation instruments in the Clario Method™ system should reference.

Communication is effective only when it creates the Shared Understanding required for the intended purpose.

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Appendix A: Communication Gap Diagnostic Checklist

The following checklist provides a structured guide for identifying Communication Gaps in any professional communication.

Table A-1. Communication Gap Diagnostic Checklist

Signal	Diagnostic Check	Gap Likely?
Purpose	Is the purpose of this communication explicitly stated and identifiable by the receiver?	Yes / No
Purpose	Can the receiver distinguish between information for action and information for awareness?	Yes / No
Action	Are specific actions, owners, deadlines, and standards clearly stated?	Yes / No
Action	Can the receiver execute the required actions based solely on this communication?	Yes / No
Decision	Is it clear what has been decided, by whom, and whether the decision is final?	Yes / No
Decision	Can the receiver distinguish decisions from recommendations and discussion points?	Yes / No
Tone	Is the tone calibrated for the audience, context, and cultural environment?	Yes / No
Tone	Would the receiver interpret the emotional dimension as the sender intended?	Yes / No
Shared Understanding	Does a verification mechanism confirm the receiver's interpretation?	Yes / No
Shared Understanding	Has the communication been evaluated from the receiver's perspective?	Yes / No

Diagnostic checklist for systematic Communication Gap identification.

Appendix B: Communication Gap Analysis Worksheet

The following worksheet provides a structured template for analyzing identified Communication Gaps.

Table B-1. Communication Gap Analysis Worksheet

Field	Entry
Communication Reviewed	
Date of Evaluation	
Evaluator	
Gap Type Identified	
Signal(s) Affected	
Gap Description	
Root Cause Category	
Severity (High / Medium / Low)	
Recommended Correction	
Verification Method	

Blank analysis worksheet for Communication Gap diagnosis.

Appendix C: Communication Gap Root Cause Guide

The following guide assists evaluators in identifying the root cause of diagnosed Communication Gaps.

Table C-1. Root Cause Identification Guide

If the gap appears to be caused by...	The root cause category is likely...	Corrective focus
Missing signal elements in the communication	Signal Deficiency	Strengthen the specific signal(s) that scored low.
The sender assuming the receiver knows more than they do	Cognitive Bias (Curse of Knowledge)	Evaluate the communication from the receiver’s perspective.
The receiver lacking background or context	Context Mismatch	Provide the contextual information the receiver needs.
The communication being relayed or paraphrased	Structural Distortion	Reduce relay steps; use written confirmation.
No mechanism for detecting the gap	Verification Absence	Introduce readback, teach-back, or written confirmation.

Guide for identifying root causes and selecting corrective strategies.

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