

What Happens When a Message Is Relayed?

Retelling is not neutral transport. A message can change as one person's reconstruction becomes another person's input.

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RN-04 | Version 1.0 | FINAL | 1 October 2026

RESEARCH QUESTION

What changes when a message is retold, summarised or passed through another person?

ABSTRACT

Organisations often treat relay as distribution: a message is created centrally, passed to managers, and expected to remain essentially the same. Research on remembering, serial reproduction and audience-tuned communication gives a different picture. Retelling is an act of reconstruction. Selection, wording, emphasis and context can change as information is made usable for the next audience.

That does not mean every change is a failure. A local version can be less faithful to the original wording and more faithful to what people need in order to act. Conversely, a relay can preserve approved language while losing a condition, threshold or exception that matters operationally. This note therefore separates textual fidelity from functional fidelity and treats relay as a distinct communication event requiring its own evidence.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Relay can transform what travels. Retelling and serial reproduction do not preserve every element of an original message equally.
2. The audience can shape the retelling. Communicators adapt messages for recipients, and that adaptation can influence what the communicator later remembers or believes.
3. Transformation is not automatically degradation. A changed version may preserve practical meaning better than a verbatim one; fidelity must be judged against a specified reference, not wording alone.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Relay is reconstruction

The simplest model of cascade is a pipe. A message enters at one end and emerges farther down the organisation. The manager's job is to pass it on.

The research record makes that metaphor difficult to defend.

Bartlett's classic work on remembering treated recall as reconstructive rather than as literal playback.[1] Later serial-reproduction research made the social implication visible. Kashima transmitted a story through five-person communication chains and found that different categories of information were retained differently as the story moved through the chain.[2] The bounded lesson is not that messages always deteriorate. It is that onward transmission can systematically change what remains available to the next person.

In organisational communication, the relay is therefore not merely a second delivery of the first message. It is a new communicative act built from what the intermediary understood, selected and considered usable.

The next audience changes the message

A relay also has an audience.

Higgins and Rholes showed that people modified a message about another person to suit what they believed the recipient liked or disliked, and that this audience-tuned communication affected the communicator's later recall and evaluation.[3] Later shared-reality work uses this "saying-is-believing" line to show that interpersonal communication can shape the communicator's own representation, not only the recipient's.[4]

The transfer to organisational cascade should remain bounded. A manager briefing a team is not the same experimental situation. But the mechanism matters: adaptation for an audience is not necessarily a cosmetic layer placed on top of a stable internal copy. The act of preparing and expressing a version for someone else can become part of what the communicator themselves subsequently carries forward.

That makes relay path-dependent. Once one version is selected and expressed, it can become the material for the next round.

Textual fidelity and functional fidelity are different

This is where a common quality standard becomes unstable.

Suppose a central message says:

"The new operating model will improve cross-functional accountability."

A local manager says:

"From Monday, Operations approves this category of customer exception."

The second version is not textually faithful. Yet it may preserve a decision-relevant implication that the original wording leaves abstract.

The reverse is also possible. A manager can repeat the approved wording exactly and omit the one condition that determines when an exception is allowed. The words survive. The operational meaning does not.

This does not justify free reinterpretation. It shows that "did the message stay the same?" is under-specified. Same in what respect: wording, factual content, decision rule, intended action, uncertainty, exception, or purpose?

A fidelity judgment requires a reference point.

What can be lost - and what can be added

Relay can remove detail through compression. It can also add context.

A manager may know which part of a central announcement will be misunderstood locally. A translator may need to replace an expression rather than reproduce it literally. A colleague may supply an example that makes an abstract rule usable. These are transformations, but transformation and distortion are not synonyms.

The risk runs both ways. Local context can improve usability; it can also import assumptions, priorities or simplifications that were not present in the source. Because both are possible, the presence of change alone cannot determine quality.

The evidence question becomes more specific:

What was the source version?

What version was relayed?

What changed between them?

Which change mattered for the claim we care about?

COMMODYN Research Note RN-01 made a related point about onward transmission: what travels next is a receiver-side outcome in its own right and should not be inferred from evidence about some other outcome.[5] RN-04 focuses on the transformation itself.

Why cascade deserves its own evidence

A central communication team may know exactly what it released. That does not establish what managers later said.

A manager may report that the message was cascaded. That does not establish what version each team received.

Employees may act consistently. That does not establish that the wording or interpretation was consistent across teams.

The relay creates a new evidentiary location. If the question concerns what actually travelled, the intermediate versions matter. Without them, conclusions about fidelity or distortion are often retrospective inferences from outcomes.

This is why a cascade can be complete administratively and still be unknown communicatively.

WHAT THIS NOTE ESTABLISHES

Evidence level: literature-based synthesis of reconstructive memory, serial reproduction and audience-tuned communication; no original empirical data.

The evidence supports three bounded propositions. Retelling can transform what travels. Adaptation to an audience can shape the message and, under studied conditions, the communicator's own later representation. And transformation should not be treated as equivalent to degradation without specifying what kind of fidelity is being judged.

CLAIM BOUNDARY

This Research Note does not claim that every relay distorts a message, that managers are unreliable intermediaries, or that verbatim repetition is inferior.

It does not establish a universal list of elements that must remain invariant across all communication.

Its narrower claim is that relay is a communicative transformation, not neutral transport. Whether a change is harmful, helpful or immaterial depends on the reference point and outcome being evaluated.

SOURCES & NOTES

1. Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Used as established prior art for reconstructive remembering and serial reproduction. The note does not treat Bartlett's specific experimental materials as a direct model of contemporary organisational cascade.
2. Kashima, Y. (2000). Maintaining Cultural Stereotypes in the Serial Reproduction of Narratives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(5), 594-604. DOI: 10.1177/0146167200267007. Kashima used five-person communication chains and found that information was not retained uniformly across social transmission. The bounded use here is that serial relay can change the composition of what survives; the study does not establish a universal pattern for organisational messages.
3. Higgins, E. T., & Rholes, W. S. (1978). "Saying is believing": Effects of message modification on memory and liking for the person described. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 14(4), 363-378. DOI: 10.1016/0022-1031(78)90032-X. Used for the finding that communicators adapted messages to recipients and that this adaptation affected later recall and evaluation under the experimental conditions.
4. Echterhoff, G., Higgins, E. T., & Levine, J. M. (2009). Shared Reality: Experiencing Commonality With Others' Inner States About the World. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(5), 496-521. DOI: 10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01161.x. Used as review-level prior art for the saying-is-believing line and for the proposition that interpersonal communication can shape communicators' own representations.
5. van Poelgeest, P. (2026). What Is Landing? COMMODYN Research Note RN-01, version 1.0. Used for the existing COMMODYN distinction between receiver-side outcomes and for treating onward transmission as an outcome that requires its own evidence.
6. van Poelgeest, P. (2026, 28 September). Please Cascade to Your Teams. LinkedIn article. This is the original public precursor of RN-04 and is included for provenance, not as independent evidence for the claims in this note.

PUBLICATION INFORMATION

AUTHOR Peter van Poelgeest

PUBLISHER COMMODYN Research

EVIDENCE TYPE Literature-based synthesis; no original empirical data

VERSION 1.0

ORIGINAL PUBLIC PROVENANCE 28 September 2026

COMPETING INTERESTS No competing interests declared.

AI ASSISTANCE AI tools were used for research support, editorial development and document production. Source selection, interpretation, claim boundaries and publication decisions remain the author's responsibility.

RECOMMENDED CITATION van Poelgeest, P. (2026). What Happens When a Message Is Relayed? COMMODYN Research Note RN-04, version 1.0.