A First Look at Interpersonal Communication

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Summary

Key Terms

Media Resources
Perhaps you played this game as a child. The group of children chooses a victim—either as punishment for committing a real or imagined offense or just for “fun.” Then for a period of time, that victim is given the silent treatment. No one speaks to him or her, and no one responds to anything the victim says or does.

If you were the subject of this silent treatment, you probably experienced a range of emotions. At first you might have felt—or at least acted—indifferent. But after a while the strain of being treated as a nonperson probably began to grow. If the game went on long enough, it’s likely you found yourself either retreating into a state of depression or lashing out with hostility—partly to show your anger and partly to get a response from the others.

Adults, as well as children, have used the silent treatment in virtually every society throughout history as a powerful tool to express displeasure and for social control. We all know intuitively that communication—the company of others—is one of the most basic human needs and that lack of contact is among the cruelest punishments a person can suffer.

Besides being emotionally painful, being deprived of companionship is so serious that it can affect life itself. Fredrick II, emperor of Germany from 1196 to 1250, may have been the first person to prove the point systematically. A medieval historian described one of his significant, if inhumane, experiments:

He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born. But he labored in vain because all the children died. For they could not live without the petting and joyful faces and loving words of their foster mothers.2

Fortunately, contemporary researchers have found less barbaric ways to illustrate the importance of communication. In one study of isolation, subjects were paid to remain alone in a locked room. Of the five subjects, one lasted for eight days. Three held out for two days, one commenting, “Never again.” The fifth subject lasted only two hours.3

The need for contact and companionship is just as strong outside the laboratory, as individuals who have led solitary lives by choice or necessity have discovered. W. Carl Jackson, an adventurer who sailed across the Atlantic Ocean alone in fifty-one days, summarized the feelings common to most loners:

I found the loneliness of the second month almost excruciating. I always thought of myself as self-sufficient, but I found life without people had no meaning. I had a definite need for somebody to talk to, someone real, alive, and breathing.4

Why We Communicate

You might object to stories like this, claiming that solitude would be a welcome relief from the irritations of everyday life. It’s true that all of us need solitude, often more than we get. On the other hand, each of us has a point beyond which we do not want to be alone. Beyond this point solitude changes from a pleasurable to a painful condition. In other words, we all need relationships. We all need to communicate.
Physical Needs

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects physical health. In extreme cases communication can even become a matter of life or death. When he was a Navy pilot, U.S. Senator John McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war for six years, often in solitary confinement. He describes how POWs set up clandestine codes in which they sent messages by tapping on walls to laboriously spell out words. McCain describes the importance of keeping contact and the risks that inmates would take to maintain contact with one another:

The punishment for communicating could be severe, and a few POWs, having been caught and beaten for their efforts, had their spirits broken as their bodies were battered. Terrified of a return trip to the punishment room, they would lie still in their cells when their comrades tried to tap them up on the wall. Very few would remain uncommunicative for long. To suffer all this alone was less tolerable than torture. Withdrawing in silence from the fellowship of other Americans . . . was to us the approach of death.5

The link between communication and physical well-being isn’t restricted to prisoners. Medical researchers have identified a wide range of health threats that can result from a lack of close relationships. For instance:

- A lack of social relationships jeopardizes coronary health to a degree that rivals cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, blood lipids, obesity, and lack of physical activity.6
- Socially isolated people are four times more susceptible to the common cold than those who have active social networks.7
- Social isolates are two to three times more likely to die prematurely than are those with strong social ties. The type of relationship doesn’t seem to matter: Marriage, friendship, religious ties, and community ties all seem to increase longevity.8
- Divorced men (before age 70) die from heart disease, cancer, and strokes at double the rate of married men. Three times as many die from hypertension; five times as many commit suicide; seven times as many die from cirrhosis of the liver; and ten times as many die from tuberculosis.9
- The rate of all types of cancer is as much as five times higher for divorced men and women, compared to their married counterparts.10
- The likelihood of death increases when a close relative dies. In one Welsh village, citizens who had lost a close relative died within one year at a rate more than five times greater than the rate of those who had not lost a relative.11
- People who are defensive suffer from higher blood pressure compared to those more willing to acknowledge their possible limitations.12

Research like this demonstrates the importance of having satisfying personal relationships. Not everyone needs the same amount of contact, and the quality of communication is almost certainly as important as the quantity. The important point is that personal communication is essential for our well-being.

Identity Needs

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way—indeed, the only way—we learn who we are. As Chapter 2 explains, our sense of identity comes from the way we interact with other people. Are we smart or stupid, attractive or
ugly, skillful or inept? The answers to these questions don’t come from looking in the mirror. We decide who we are based on how others react to us.

Deprived of communication with others, we would have no sense of ourselves. In his book *Bridges Not Walls*, John Stewart dramatically illustrates this fact by citing the case of the famous “Wild Boy of Aveyron,” who spent his early childhood without any apparent human contact. The boy was discovered in January 1800 digging for vegetables in a French village garden. He showed no behaviors that one would expect in a social human. The boy could not speak but rather uttered only weird cries. More significant than this lack of social skills was his lack of any identity as a human being. As author Roger Shattuck put it, “The boy had no human sense of being in the world. He had no sense of himself as a person related to other persons.” Only with the influence of a loving “mother” did the boy begin to behave—and, we can imagine, think of himself—as a human.

Like the boy of Aveyron, each of us enters the world with little or no sense of identity. We gain an idea of who we are from the way others define us. As Chapter 2 explains, the messages we receive in early childhood are the strongest, but the influence of others continues throughout life.

**Social Needs**

Besides helping to define who we are, communication provides a vital link with others. Researchers and theorists have identified a whole range of social needs that we satisfy by communicating. These include pleasure, affection, companionship, escape, relaxation, and control.

Needs like these arise in virtually every relationship—with friends, fellow workers, family members, lovers, spouses, and even strangers. And communication
is the primary way we satisfy our social needs. In fact, some social scientists have argued that communication is the principal way by which relationships are created. For example, a study of 1,800 southern Californians showed that “good old-fashioned chats” with neighbors are the surest way to build a sense of community.

Research suggests a strong link between effective interpersonal communication and happiness. In one study of over 200 college students, the happiest 10 percent described themselves as having a rich social life. (The very happy people were no different from their classmates in any other measurable way such as amount of sleep, exercise, TV watching, religious activity, or alcohol consumption.) In another study, women reported that “socializing” contributed more to a satisfying life than virtually any other activity, including relaxing, shopping, eating, exercise, TV, or prayer.

A variety of evidence suggests that many people aren’t very successful at managing their interpersonal relationships. For example, one study revealed that one-quarter of the more than 4,000 adults surveyed knew more about their dogs than they did about their neighbors’ backgrounds. Americans believe that communication problems “very frequently” cause a marriage or a relationship to end—more than money, relatives or in-laws, sex, previous relationships, or children.

Because relationships with others are so vital, some theorists have gone as far as to argue that communication is the primary goal of human existence. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt terms the drive for meeting social needs the “human career.” If you pause now and make a mental list of your own relationships, you’ll probably see that, no matter how successful your relationships at home, with friends, at school, and at work, there is plenty of room for improvement in your everyday life. The information that follows will help you improve the way you communicate with the people who matter most to you.

**Practical Goals**

Besides satisfying social needs and shaping our identity, communication is the most widely used approach to satisfying what communication scholars call **instrumental goals**: getting others to behave in ways we want. Some instrumental goals are quite basic: Communication is the tool that lets you tell the hair stylist to take just a little off the sides, lets you negotiate household duties, and lets you convince the plumber that the broken pipe needs attention *now*!
Other instrumental goals are more important. Career success is the prime example. Communication skills—the ability to speak and listen effectively—are the top factors in helping college graduates find jobs in an increasingly competitive workplace, ranking higher than technical competence, work experience, and specific degree earned. Good communication on the job is just as important. Economist James Flanigan explains: “Communication skills will fetch premium pay. The person who talks on the phone to mutual fund investors will have to be even more knowledgeable, efficient, and personable than the bank teller of old. Competition for such jobs won’t be based on pay alone but on skills.” This means that good personal skills aren’t just a social nicety: They can mean the difference between success and failure on the job.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that the physical, identity, social, and practical needs we have been discussing fall into five hierarchical categories, each of which must be satisfied before we concern ourselves with the less fundamental needs. The most basic of these needs are physical: sufficient air, water, food, and rest, and the ability to reproduce as a species. The second of Maslow’s needs is safety: protection from threats to our well-being. Beyond physical and safety needs are the social needs we have mentioned already. Beyond these, Maslow suggests, each of us has self-esteem needs: the desire to believe that we are worthwhile, valuable people. The final category of needs described by Maslow is self-actualization: the desire to develop our potential to the maximum, to become the best person we can be. As you read on, think about the ways in which communication is often necessary to satisfy each level of need.

The Process of Communication

We have been talking about communication as though the meaning of this word were perfectly clear. Before going further we need to explain systematically what happens when people exchange messages with one another. Doing so will introduce you to a common working vocabulary and, at the same time, preview some of the topics that are covered in later chapters.

A Linear View

In the early days of studying communication as a social science, researchers created models to illustrate the communication process. Their first attempts resulted in a linear communication model, which depicts communication as something a sender “does to” a receiver. According to the linear model in Figure 1.1,

A sender (the person creating the message)
encodes (puts thoughts into symbols, usually words) a
message (the information being transmitted), sending it through a channel (the medium through which the message passes) to a receiver (the person attending to the message) who decodes (makes sense of the message), while contending with noise (distractions that disrupt transmission).

Notice how the appearance and vocabulary in Figure 1.1 represent how radio and television broadcasting operate. This isn’t a coincidence: The scientists who created it were primarily interested in electronic media. The widespread use of this model has affected the way we think and talk about communication. There is a linear, machinelike quality to familiar phrases such as “We’re having a communication breakdown” and “I don’t think my message is getting through.”

These familiar phrases (and the thinking they represent) obscure some important differences between mechanical and human communication. Does interpersonal communication really “break down,” or are people still exchanging information even when they’re not talking to each other? Is it possible to “get a message through” to someone loudly and clearly, but still not get the desired reaction? Here are some other questions to consider about the shortcomings of the linear model:

- When you’re having a conversation with a friend, is there only one sender and one receiver, or do both of you send and receive messages simultaneously?
- Do you purposely encode every message you send, or are there behaviors you engage in unconsciously that still communicate messages to others?
- Does communication take place in a vacuum, or is a message’s meaning affected by larger factors such as culture, environment, and relational history?

These and other questions have led scholars to create models that better represent interpersonal communication. We will look at one of these models now.

A Transactional View

A transactional communication model (Figure 1.2) updates and expands the linear model to better capture communication as a uniquely human process. Some concepts and terms from the linear model are retained in the transactional model, while others are enhanced, added, or eliminated.

The transactional model uses the word communicator instead of sender and receiver. This term reflects the fact that people send and receive messages simultaneously and not in a unidirectional or back-and-forth manner, as suggested by the
linear model. Consider, for example, what might happen when you and a housemate negotiate how to handle household chores. As soon as you begin to hear (receive) the words sent by your housemate, “I want to talk about cleaning the kitchen . . . ,” you grimace and clench your jaw (sending a nonverbal message of your own while receiving the verbal one). This reaction leads your housemate to interrupt herself defensively, sending a new message: “Now wait a minute. . . .”

A transactional model also shows that communicators often occupy different environments—fields of experience that affect how they understand others’ behavior. In communication terminology, environment refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation.

Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments:

- Person A might belong to one ethnic group and person B to another.
- A might be rich and B poor.
- A might be rushed and B have nowhere to go.
- A might have lived a long, eventful life and B might be young and inexperienced.
- A might be passionately concerned with the subject and B indifferent to it.

Notice how the model in Figure 1.2 shows that the environments of individuals A and B overlap. This area represents the background that the communicators have in common. As the shared environment becomes smaller, communication becomes more difficult. Consider a few examples in which different perspectives can make understanding difficult:

- Bosses who have trouble understanding the perspective of their employees will be less effective managers, and workers who do not appreciate the challenges of being a boss are more likely to be uncooperative (and probably less suitable for advancement).
- Parents who have trouble recalling their youth are likely to clash with their children, who have never known and may not appreciate the responsibility that comes with parenting.
- Members of a dominant culture who have never experienced how it feels to be “different” may not appreciate the concerns of people from minority co-cultures, whose own perspectives make it hard to understand the cultural blindness of the majority.

Communication channels retain a significant role in the transactional model, as they did in the linear model. Although it’s tempting to see channels simply as neutral conduits for delivering a message, a closer look reveals the important role they play. For instance, should you say “I love you” in person? Over the phone? By renting space on a billboard? By sending flowers and a card? With a singing telegram? Via e-mail? In a voice mail? Each channel has its differences, and each affects the meaning of the message.

The transactional model also retains the concept of noise but with a broader focus. In the linear model, the focus is on noise in the channel—which is known as external noise. For instance, loud music or too much cigarette smoke in a crowded room might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person. The transactional model shows that noise also resides within communicators. This includes physiological noise, which involves biological factors that interfere with accurate reception: illness, fatigue, hearing loss, and so on. Communicators can also encounter psychological noise: forces within that interfere with the ability...
to understand a message accurately. For instance, a student might become so upset upon learning that she failed a test that she would be unable (perhaps unwilling is a better word) to understand clearly where she went wrong. Psychological noise is such an important communication problem that we have devoted much of Chapter 10 to investigating its most common form, defensiveness.

For all the insights they offer, models can’t capture some important features of interpersonal communication. A model is a “snapshot,” while communication more closely resembles a “motion picture.” In real life it’s difficult to isolate a single discrete “act” of communication from the events that precede and follow it. Consider the “Zits” cartoon on this page. If you read only the final frame, it appears that Jeremy is the victim of his mother’s nagging. If you then read the first three frames, you might conclude that if Jeremy were more responsive to his mother, she might not need to be so persistent. And if you watched the two of them interact over the days and weeks preceding the incident in this cartoon, you would have a larger (but still incomplete) picture of the relational history that contributed to this event. In other words, the communication pattern that Jeremy and his mother have created together contributes to the quality of their relationship.

This leads to another important point: Transactional communication isn’t something that we do to others; rather, it is an activity that we do with them. In this sense, person-to-person communication is rather like dancing—at least the kind of dancing we do with partners. Like dancing, communication depends on the involvement of a partner. And like good dancing, successful communication doesn’t depend only on the person who takes the lead. A great dancer who forgets to consider and adapt to the skill level of his or her partner can make both people look bad. In communication and dancing, even having two talented partners doesn’t guarantee success. When two skilled dancers perform without coordinating their movements, the results feel bad to the dancers and look foolish to an audience. Finally, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises out of the way in which the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies from one partner to another.

The transactional nature of communication shows up dramatically in relationships between parents and their children. We normally think of “good parenting” as a skill that some people possess and others lack. We judge the ability of a mother and father in terms of how well their children turn out. In fact, research suggests that the quality of interaction between parents and children is a two-way affair—that children influence parents just as much as the reverse. For example, children who engage in what social scientists call “problematic behavior” evoke more high-control responses from their parents than do cooperative children. By contrast, youngsters with mild temperaments are less likely to provoke coercive reactions by their parents than are more-aggressive children. Parents with low self-esteem tend to send more messages that weaken the self-esteem of their children, who in turn
Let it be a dance we do. 
May I have this dance 
with you? 
Through the good times 
And the bad times, too, 
Let it be a dance.

Learn to follow, learn to 
lead, 
Feel the rhythm, fill the 
need. 
To reap the harvest, plant 
the seed. 
And let it be a dance.

Morning star comes out at 
night, 
Without the dark there is 
no light. 
If nothing’s wrong, then 
nothing’s right. 
Let it be a dance.

Ric Masten
are likely to act in ways that make the parents feel even worse about themselves. Thus, a mutually reinforcing cycle arises in which parents and children shape one another’s feelings and behavior. In cases like this it’s at least difficult and probably impossible to identify who is the “sender” and who is the “receiver” of messages. It’s more accurate to acknowledge that parents and children—just like husbands and wives, bosses and employees, teachers and students, or any other people in relationships—act in ways that mutually influence one another.

Now we can summarize the definition of communication that we have been developing. Communication is a transactional process involving participants who occupy different but overlapping environments and create relationships through the exchange of messages, many of which are affected by external, physiological, and psychological noise. Whether or not you memorize this definition is a matter for you and your instructor to decide. In any case, notice how it reflects a more sophisticated view of the process than you might have had before reading this far.

### Invitation to Insight

**Comparing and Contrasting Communication Models**

Visit the Pragmatic Communication Model website. You can find the explanation and then, in your own words, summarize the similarities and differences between the Pragmatic Model at this site and the Transactional Model in your textbook. What does each have in common? What does one model explain better than the other? Which one do you prefer and why?

### Communication Principles and Misconceptions

Before we look at the qualities that distinguish interpersonal communication, it’s important to define what communication is and what it isn’t and to discuss what it can and can’t accomplish.

#### Communication Principles

It’s possible to draw several important conclusions about communication from what you have already learned in this chapter.

**Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional** Some communication is clearly intentional: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. Some scholars argue that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. Others argue that even unintentional behavior is communicative. Suppose, for instance, that a friend overhears you muttering complaints to yourself. Even though you didn’t intend for her to hear your remarks, they certainly did carry a message. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sigh of boredom, but others view them nonetheless. Scholars have debated without reaching consensus about whether unintentional behavior should be considered communication, and it’s unlikely that they will ever settle this issue.27

In *Looking Out/Looking In* we will look at the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior.
Communication Is Irreversible  

We sometimes wish that we could back up in time, erasing words or acts and replacing them with better alternatives. Unfortunately, such reversal is impossible. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up another’s confusion, or an apology can mollify another’s hurt feelings, but other times no amount of explanation can erase the impression you have created. It is no more possible to “unreceive” a message than to “unsqueeze” a tube of toothpaste. Words said and deeds done are irretrievable.

It’s Impossible Not to Communicate  

Because both intentional and unintentional behaviors send a message, many theorists agree that it is impossible not to communicate. Whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, act emotional or keep a poker face—you provide information to others about your thoughts and feelings. In this sense we are like transmitters that can’t be shut off.

Of course, the people who decode your message may not interpret it accurately. They might take your kidding seriously or underestimate your feelings, for example. The message that you intend to convey may not even resemble the one that others infer from your actions. Thus, when we talk about “a communication breakdown” or “miscommunication,” we rarely mean that communication has ended. Instead, we mean that it is inaccurate, ineffective, or unsatisfying.

This explains why the best way to boost understanding is to discuss your intentions and your interpretations of the other person’s behavior until you have negotiated a shared meaning. The perception-checking skills described in Chapter 3, the tips on clear language offered in Chapter 5, and the listening skills introduced in Chapter 7 will give you tools to boost the odds that the meanings of messages you send and receive are understandable to both you and others.

Communication Is Unrepeatable  

Because communication is an ongoing process, it is impossible to repeat the same event. The friendly smile that worked so well when meeting a stranger last week might not succeed with the person you meet...

"We can pause, Stu—we can even try fast-forwarding—but we can never rewind."
tomorrow: It might feel stale and artificial to you the second time around, or it might be wrong for the new person or occasion. Even with the same person, it’s impossible to re-create an event. Why? Because neither you nor the other person is the same person. You’ve both lived longer. Your feelings about each other may have changed. You need not constantly invent new ways to act around familiar people, but you should realize that the “same” words and behavior are different each time they are spoken or performed.

**Communication Has a Content and a Relational Dimension** Practically all exchanges operate on two levels. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: “Turn left at the next corner.” “You can buy that for less online.” “You’re standing on my foot.” In addition to this sort of obvious content, all messages also have a **relational dimension** that expresses how you feel about the other person: whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, feel comfortable or anxious, and so on. 29 For instance, consider how many different relational messages you could communicate by simply saying, “I’m busy tonight, but maybe some other time” in different ways.

Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you probably don’t care much about how the customer service rep feels about you as long as you get a technician scheduled to fix your car. At other times, though, the relational dimension of a message is more important than the content under discussion. This explains why arguments can develop over apparently trivial subjects like whose turn it is to wash the dishes or how to spend the weekend. In cases like this, what’s really being tested is the nature of the relationship. Who’s in control? How important are we to each other? Chapter 8 will explore these key relational issues in detail.

**Communication Misconceptions**

It’s just as important to know what communication is **not** as to know what it is. 30 Avoiding the following misconceptions can save you a great deal of personal trouble.

**More Communication Is Not Always Better** Whereas not communicating enough can cause problems, there are also situations when **too much** communication is a mistake. Sometimes excessive communication is simply unproductive, as when two people “talk a problem to death,” going over the same ground again and again without making progress. There are other times when talking too much actually aggravates a problem. We’ve all had the experience of “talking ourselves into a hole”—making a bad situation worse by pursuing it too far. As one communication book puts it, “More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results.” 31

**Meanings Are Not in Words** The biggest mistake we can make is to assume that **saying** something is the same thing as **communicating** it. As Chapter 3 explains, the words that make perfect sense to you can be interpreted in entirely different ways by others. Chapter 5 describes the most common types of verbal misunderstandings and suggests ways to minimize them. Chapter 7 introduces listening skills that help ensure that the way you receive messages matches the ideas that a speaker is trying to convey.
Successful Communication Doesn’t Always Involve Shared Understanding  Mutual understanding is sometimes a measure of successful communication, but there are times when success comes from not completely understanding one another. For example, we are often deliberately vague in order to spare another’s feelings. Imagine how you might reply when a friend asks, “What do you think about my new tattoo?” You might tactfully say, “Wow—that’s really unusual,” instead of honestly and clearly answering, “I think it’s grotesque.” In cases like this we sacrifice clarity for the sake of kindness and to maintain our relationships.

Some research suggests that satisfying relationships depend in part on flawed understanding. As the cartoon on this page suggests, couples who think their partners understand them are more satisfied with each other than those who actually understand what the other says and means. In other words, more-satisfying relationships can sometimes come from less-than-perfect understanding. Chapter 9 describes in detail the way we sometimes sacrifice clarity for the sake of maintaining relationships.

No Single Person or Event Causes Another’s Reaction  Although communicative skill can often make the difference between satisfying and unsatisfying outcomes, it’s a mistake to suggest that any single thing we say or do causes an outcome. Many factors play a role in how others will react to your communication in a single situation. Suppose, for example, that you lose your temper and say something to a friend that you regret as soon as the words escape your lips. Your friend’s reaction will depend on a whole host of events besides your unjustified remark: her frame of mind at the moment (uptight or mellow), elements of her personality (judgmental or forgiving), your relational history (supportive or hostile), and her knowledge of any factors in your life that might have contributed to your unjustified remark. Because communication is a transactional, ongoing, collaborative process, it’s usually a mistake to think that any event occurs in a vacuum.

Communication Will Not Solve All Problems  Sometimes even the best-planned, best-timed communication won’t solve a problem. Imagine, for example, that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project that you believe deserved top marks. The instructor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the poor grade and sticks to that position after listening thoughtfully to your protests. Has communication solved the problem? Hardly.

Sometimes clear communication is even the cause of problems. Suppose, for example, that a friend asks you for an honest opinion of the $200 outfit he has just bought. Your clear and sincere answer, “I think it makes you look fat,” might do more harm than good. Deciding when and how to self-disclose isn’t always easy. See Chapter 9 for suggestions.
The Nature of Interpersonal Communication

Now that you have a better understanding of the overall process of human communication, it's time to look at what makes some types uniquely interpersonal.

Two Views of Interpersonal Communication

Scholars have characterized interpersonal communication in a number of ways. The most obvious definition focuses on the number of people involved. A quantitative definition of interpersonal communication includes any interaction between two people, usually face to face. Social scientists call two people interacting a dyad, and they often use the adjective dyadic to describe this type of communication. So, in a quantitative sense, the terms dyadic communication and interpersonal communication can be used interchangeably. Using a quantitative definition, a salesclerk and customer or a police officer ticketing a speeding driver would be examples of interpersonal acts, whereas a teacher and class or a performer and audience would not.

You might object to the quantitative definition of interpersonal communication. For example, consider a routine transaction between a salesclerk and customer or the rushed exchange when you ask a stranger on the street for directions. Communication of this sort hardly seems interpersonal—or personal in any sense of the word. In fact, after transactions like this we commonly remark, “I might as well have been talking to a machine.”

The impersonal nature of some two-person exchanges and the personal nature of others have led some scholars to argue that quality, not quantity, is what distinguishes interpersonal communication. Using a qualitative definition, interpersonal communication occurs when people treat one another as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved. When quality of interaction is the criterion, the opposite of interpersonal communication is impersonal communication, not group, public, or mass communication.

Several features distinguish qualitatively interpersonal communication from less-personal communication. The first feature is uniqueness. Communication in impersonal exchanges is determined by social rules (laugh politely at others’ jokes, don’t dominate a conversation, and so on) and by social roles (the customer is always right, be especially polite to senior citizens). Qualitatively interpersonal relationships are characterized by the development of unique rules and roles. For example, in one relationship you might exchange good-natured insults, whereas in another you are careful never to offend your partner. Likewise, you might handle conflicts with one friend or family member by expressing disagreements as soon as they arise, whereas the unwritten rule in another relationship is to withhold resentments until they build up and then clear the air periodically. One communication scholar coined the term relational culture to describe people in close relationships who create their own unique ways of interacting.

A second feature of qualitatively interpersonal relationships is irreplaceability. Because interpersonal relationships are unique, they can’t be replaced. This explains why we usually feel so sad when a close friendship or love affair cools down. We know that no matter how many other relationships fill our lives, none of them will ever be quite like the one that just ended.
I marvel
At the large quantity
Of communication
Between the two of us
Otherwise
I can only
get discouraged
By its bleak
Quality.

Vlado Uzunangelov
Interdependence is a third feature of qualitatively interpersonal relationships. At the most basic level the fate of the partners is connected. You might be able to brush off the anger, affection, excitement, or depression of someone you’re not involved with personally, but in an interpersonal relationship the other’s life affects you. Sometimes interdependence is a pleasure, and at other times it is a burden. In either case, it is a fact of life in qualitatively interpersonal relationships. Interdependence goes beyond the level of joined fates. In interpersonal relationships, our very identity depends on the nature of our interaction with others. As psychologist Kenneth Gergen puts it: “One cannot be ‘attractive’ without others who are attracted, a ‘leader’ without others willing to follow, or a ‘loving person’ without others to affirm with appreciation.”37

A fourth feature of interpersonal relationships is often (though not always) the amount of disclosure of personal information. In impersonal relationships we don’t reveal much about ourselves, but in interpersonal relationships we feel more comfortable sharing our thoughts and feelings. This doesn’t mean that all interpersonal relationships are warm and caring, or that all self-disclosure is positive. It’s possible to reveal negative, personal information: “I’m really mad at you. . . .”

A fifth feature of interpersonal communication is intrinsic rewards. In impersonal communication we seek payoffs that have little to do with the people involved. You listen to professors in class or talk to potential buyers of your used car in order to reach goals that have little to do with developing personal relationships. By contrast, you spend time in qualitatively interpersonal relationships with friends, lovers, and others because you find the time personally rewarding. It often doesn’t matter what you talk about: The relationship itself is what’s important.

Because relationships that are unique, irreplaceable, interdependent, disclosing, and intrinsically rewarding are rare, qualitatively interpersonal communication is relatively scarce. We chat pleasantly with shopkeepers or fellow passengers...
on the bus or plane; we discuss the weather or current events with most classmates and neighbors; we deal with co-workers and teachers in a polite way; but considering the number of people with whom we communicate, personal relationships are by far in the minority.

The rarity of personal relationships isn’t necessarily unfortunate. Most of us don’t have the time or energy to create personal relationships with everyone we encounter. In fact, the scarcity of qualitatively interpersonal communication contributes to its value. Like precious jewels and one-of-a-kind artwork, interpersonal relationships are special because of their scarcity.

### Technology and Interpersonal Communication

Face-to-face conversation isn’t the only way people can create and maintain personal relationships. Along with the telephone and old-fashioned correspondence, **computer-mediated communication** (CMC) provides another way to interact. Instant messaging, e-mailing, blogging, and online chat are some of the many ways that acquaintances—and strangers—can communicate through CMC.

A growing body of research reveals that CMC isn’t the threat to relationships that some critics once feared. Most Internet users—both adults and children—report the time they spend online has no influence on the amount of time they spend with their family or friends. Over three-quarters of these people say they never feel ignored by another household member spending time online. In fact, the majority of Internet users said that IMing, e-mail, websites, and chat rooms had a “modestly positive impact” on their ability to communicate with family members and make new friends. Over half of the people surveyed state that the number of their personal relationships has grown since they started to use the Internet.39

More recent studies are similarly positive about the role that CMC plays in people’s relationships and decision making. They show that mediated communication enriches social networks. This is especially true among teens and younger adults who have grown up using the Internet, but findings prove true across generations. For example,

- Internet users have more social networks than non-users.
- CMC is a source of “glocalization,” connecting people to distant friends and relatives as well as to those who live nearby.
- CMC encourages offline interaction with close friends by keeping relationships alive and active.
- Text-only format of e-mail and instant messages can bring people closer by minimizing the perception of differences due to gender, social class, ethnicity, and age.

It’s important to note that CMC isn’t a replacement for face-to-face communication. One study of college students who frequently use instant messaging concluded that “nothing appears to compare to face-to-face communication in terms of satisfying individuals’ communication, information, and social needs.” Rather than diminishing other forms of communication, CMC actually promotes and reinforces them. Furthermore, there is an interactive relationship between CMC, phone contact, and in-person communication. In other words, if you regularly communicate with friends and family over the computer, it is likely that you will also call them and try to see them more often.42

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To know all your neighbors on the global level does not mean that you will automatically love them all; it does not, in and of itself, introduce a reign of peace and brotherhood. But to be potentially in touch with everybody at least makes fighting more uncomfortable. It becomes easier to argue instead.

Isaac Asimov, “The Fourth Revolution”
She was 7,000 miles away from our apartment in China, ensconced in the suburbs of New York City attending to her ill father. I was in a place where the phone system barely worked and the idea of public Internet access was laughable—Kabul, the war-wasted capital of Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, there it was, uploaded through the ether from Long Island on a January morning, bounced off an orbiting satellite, beamed back down to an antenna on the second-floor balcony of an Afghan house. My wife’s missive reached me in an instant, offering the romantic interrogative of a high-velocity world.

“You there?” Melissa asked, beeping as her pixilated box appeared.

And there she was, luminous as ever in her usual online outfit—10-point Times New Roman, with her name draped in brilliant royal blue.

Instant messaging (or IMing for short) is becoming to the dawn of the 21st century what the telephone was to the beginning of the 20th—a normal way of communicating in real time across previously uncrossable distances, making faster, if not better, typists of us all.

How different it is, and how little we realize it. Could human beings really have once existed in a world where we had to communicate by paper, where ink-smeared messages took weeks, even months to cross oceans and inform recipients that someone far away loved them?

Today, that old absence that once ached across impassable divides wondering and waiting can now connect in seconds—via satellite.

It may not be the most personal way of relating. But for us, separated by the miles and by general craziness, it has made being apart a bit less miserable.

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Today, that old absence that once made the heart grow fonder is assuaged by the new-message notification. Souls that once ached across impassable divides wondering and waiting can now connect in seconds—via satellite.

It may not be the most personal way of relating. But for us, separated by the miles and by general craziness, it has made being apart a bit less miserable.

It’s not just her, either. More than email or even the telephone, it connects me to my confidantes—from New York City to Pittsburgh, Arkansas to Egypt to suburban Virginia and the North Carolina mountains. One friend in New York starts work precisely at 8 A.M. I hear the “door” of AOL Instant Messenger open, and she immediately chimes in: “Hello there.”

In 1979, when I was 11 and living in Beijing the first time, we made one overseas telephone call all year—to my sister on her birthday. And we had to go through three operators to do it.

Today, my 78-year-old mother—born before the era of the dial tone—is an avid IM user. She pops in from suburban Pittsburgh while I’m at work, “just saying hi” from 13 time zones away. “Is everything OK?” I ask her each day, worried about my parents’ health. She responds: “Dad and I are fine. It’s quiet here.”

Our instantaneous mini-universes hold pitfalls: You can’t hear tone, so the danger of misinterpretation always looms. A breezy joke dispatched on one side can arrive as snippiness on the other end. And, of course, all the :)s and ;)s in the universe can’t approximate an in-person smile, an actual hug.

“It’s a blessing,” my wife wrote me in August (from New York to Beijing), “but it’s also become a substitute that’s so much like something real that people can almost skip the real getting together. I wonder what effect it’ll have down the road. On our generation and the one after.”

A fascinating question. What’s the next step in the story of human communication? I guess I’ll have to ask our new baby.

We’re having one next summer, it seems. In our frenzied, information-saturated marriage, clearly we’ve managed to transcend typing at least once.

Ted Anthony
There are several reasons why CMC can increase both the quantity and quality of interpersonal communication. For one thing, CMC makes communication easier.43 Busy schedules and long distances can make quality time in face-to-face contact difficult or impossible. The challenge of finding time is especially tough for people who are separated by long distances and multiple time zones. In relationships like this, the asynchronous nature of e-mail provides a way to share information that otherwise would be impossible. Communicators can create their own message and respond to one another without having to connect in real time. Instant messaging is another way to keep in touch: Discovering that a friend or relative is online and starting an electronic conversation is “like walking down the street and sometimes running into a friend,” says Laura Balsam, a New York computer consultant.44

Even when face-to-face communication is convenient, some people find it easier to share personal information via CMC. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen describes how e-mail transformed the quality of two relationships:

E-mail deepened my friendship with Ralph. Though his office was next to mine, we rarely had extended conversations because he is shy. Face to face he mumbled so, I could barely tell he was speaking. But when we both got on e-mail, I started receiving long, self-revealing messages; we poured our hearts out to each other. A friend discovered that e-mail opened up that kind of communication with her father. He would never talk much on the phone (as her mother would), but they have become close since they both got on line.45

Experiences like these help explain why Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Computer, suggested that personal computers be renamed “interpersonal computers.”46

Personal and Impersonal Communication: A Matter of Balance

Now that you understand the differences between qualitatively interpersonal and impersonal communication, we need to ask some important questions. Is interpersonal communication better than impersonal communication? Is more interpersonal communication the goal?
Most relationships aren’t *either* interpersonal *or* impersonal. Rather, they fall somewhere on a continuum between these two extremes. Your own experience probably reveals that there is often a personal element in even the most impersonal situations. You might appreciate the unique sense of humor of a grocery checker or connect on a personal level with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

Just as there’s a personal element in many impersonal settings, there is also an impersonal element in our relationships with the people we care most about. There are occasions when we don’t want to be personal: when we’re distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. In fact, interpersonal communication is rather like rich food—it’s fine in moderation, but too much can make you uncomfortable.

The personal-impersonal mixture of communicating in a relationship can change over time. The communication between young lovers who talk only about their feelings may change as their relationship develops, so that several years later their communication has become more routine and ritualized, and the percentage of time they spend on personal, relational issues drops and the conversation about less intimate topics increases. Chapter 8 discusses how communication changes as relationships pass through various stages and also describes the role of self-disclosure in keeping those relationships strong. As you read this information, you will see even more clearly that, although interpersonal communication can make life worth living, it isn’t possible or desirable all the time.

It’s clear that there is a place in our lives for both impersonal and interpersonal communication. Each type has its uses. The real challenge, then, is to find the right balance between the two types.

**What Makes an Effective Communicator?**

It’s easy to recognize good communicators and even easier to spot poor ones. But what are the characteristics that distinguish effective communicators from their less successful counterparts? Answering this question has been one of the leading challenges for communication scholars. Although all the answers aren’t yet in, research has identified a great deal of important information about communication competence.
Communication Competence Defined

Defining communication competence isn’t as easy as it might seem. Although scholars are still struggling to agree on a precise definition, most would agree that effective communication involves achieving one’s goals in a manner that, ideally, maintains or enhances the relationship in which it occurs.48 A closer look at this definition helps us talk about several important characteristics of communication competence.

There Is No “Ideal” Way to Communicate Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, whereas

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Invitation to Insight

How Personal Are Your Relationships?

Use the characteristics of qualitatively interpersonal communication described on pages 18–20 to think about your own relationships.

1. Make a list of several people who are close to you—family members, people you live with, friends, co-workers, and so on.

2. Use the scales that follow to rate each relationship. To distinguish the relationships from one another, use a different color of ink for each one.

3. Consider comparing your results with those of classmates or friends.

After completing the exercise, ask yourself the important question: How satisfied are you with the answers you have found?

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others are quieter; and some are more straightforward, whereas others hint diplomatically. Just as there are many kinds of beautiful music or art, there are many kinds of competent communication. It certainly is possible to learn new, effective ways of communicating from observing models, but it would be a mistake to try to copy others in a way that doesn’t reflect your own style or values.

As you’ll read throughout this book, what qualifies as competent behavior in one culture might be completely inept, or even offensive, in another.49 On an obvious level, customs like belching after a meal or appearing nude in public that might be appropriate in some parts of the world would be considered outrageous in others. But there are more subtle differences in competent communication. For example, qualities like self-disclosing and speaking clearly that are valued in the United States are likely to be considered overly aggressive and insensitive in many Asian cultures, where subtlety and indirectness are considered important.50 Even within a single society, members of various co-cultures may have different notions of appropriate behavior. One study revealed that ideas of how good friends should communicate varied from one ethnic group category. An “I-Thou” posture goes further: Not only are people different from one another, but also they themselves change from moment to moment. An “I-Thou” relationship arises out of how we are now, not how we might have been yesterday or even a moment ago. In an “I-Thou” relationship, persuasion and control are out of the question: We certainly may explain our point of view, but ultimately we respect the fact that others are free to act.

Buber acknowledges that it is impossible to create and sustain pure “I-Thou” relationships. But without this qualitatively interpersonal level of contact, our lives are impoverished. To paraphrase Buber, without “I-It” we cannot exist; but if we live only with “I-It,” we are not fully human.

Think of your most important relationships:

1. To what degree can they be described as “I-Thou” or “I-It”?  
2. How satisfied are you with this level of relating?  
3. What obligation do you have to treat others in an “I-Thou” manner?

Based on your answers to these questions, how might you change your style of communication?

to another. As a group, Latinos valued relational support most highly, whereas African Americans valued respect and acceptance. Asian Americans prized a caring, positive exchange of ideas, and Anglo Americans prized friends who recognized their needs as individuals. Findings like these mean that there can be no surefire list of rules or tips that will guarantee your success as a communicator. They also mean that competent communicators are able to adapt their style to suit the individual and cultural preferences of others. See pages 34–36 for specific tips about communicating most effectively with people from different backgrounds.

**Competence Is Situational** Even within a culture or relationship, the specific communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another. The joking insults you routinely trade with one friend might offend a sensitive family member, and last Saturday night’s romantic approach would most likely be out of place at work on Monday morning.

Because competent behavior varies so much from one situation and person to another, it’s a mistake to think that communication competence is a trait that a person either has or does not have. It’s more accurate to talk about degrees or areas of competence. You might deal quite skillfully with peers, for example, but feel clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, wealthier or poorer, more or less attractive than yourself. In fact, your competence with one person may vary from situation to situation. This means that it’s an overgeneralization to say in a moment of distress, “I’m a terrible communicator!” when it’s more accurate to say, “I didn’t handle this situation very well, even though I’m better in others.”

**Competence Is Relational** Because communication is transactional—something we do with others rather than to others—behavior that is competent in one relationship isn’t necessarily competent in others. One important measure of competence is whether the people with whom you are communicating view your approach as effective. For example, researchers have uncovered a variety of ways by which people deal with jealousy in their relationships. The ways include keeping closer tabs on the partner, acting indifferent, decreasing affection, talking the matter over, and acting angry. The researchers concluded that approaches that work in some relationships would be harmful to others. Findings like these demonstrate that competence arises out of developing ways of interacting that work for you and for the other people involved.

**Competence Can Be Learned** To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication style. Studies of identical and fraternal twins suggest that traits including sociability, anger, and relaxation seem to be partially a function of our genetic makeup. Chapter 2 will have more to say about the role of neurobiology in communication traits.

Fortunately, biology isn’t the only factor that shapes how we communicate. Communication competence is, to a great degree, a set of skills that anyone can learn. Skills training has been found to help communicators in a variety of ways, ranging from overcoming speech anxiety to becoming more perceptive in detecting deception. Research also shows that college students typically become more competent communicators over the course of their undergraduate
studies. In other words, your level of competence can improve through education and training—which means that reading this book and taking this course can help you become a more competent communicator.

**Invitation to Insight**

**Assessing Your Communication Skills**

CENGAGENOW How effective are you as a communicator? You can get a clearer answer to this question by taking an online self-assessment. You can find the link to this site through your CengageNOW for Looking Out/Looking In.

This self-test measures your abilities in the following interpersonal communication areas: adaptability, conversational involvement, conversation management, empathy, effectiveness, and appropriateness. This test requires an honest self-assessment. Even if you don’t like what you learn about yourself, you will find the self-test is a good way to set goals for improving your communication.

**Characteristics of Competent Communicators**

Despite the fact that competent communication varies from one situation to another, scholars have identified several common denominators that characterize effective communication in most contexts.

**A Wide Range of Behaviors**

Effective communicators are able to choose their actions from a wide range of behaviors. To understand the importance of having a large communication repertoire, imagine that someone you know repeatedly tells jokes—perhaps racist or sexist ones—that you find offensive. You could respond to these jokes in a number of ways:

- You could decide to say nothing, figuring that the risks of bringing the subject up would be greater than the benefits.
- You could ask a third party to say something to the joke teller about the offensiveness of the jokes.
- You could hint at your discomfort, hoping your friend would get the point.
- You could joke about your friend’s insensitivity, counting on humor to soften the blow of your criticism.
- You could express your discomfort in a straightforward way, asking your friend to stop telling the offensive jokes, at least around you.
- You could even demand that your friend stop.

With this choice of responses at your disposal (and you can probably think of others as well), you could pick the one that has the best chance of success. But if you were able to use only one or two of these responses when raising a delicate issue—always keeping quiet or always hinting, for example—your chances of success would be much smaller. Indeed, many poor communicators are easy to spot by their limited range of responses. Some are chronic jokers. Others are always belligerent. Still others are quiet in almost every situation. Like a piano player who knows only one tune or a chef who can prepare only a few dishes, these people are forced to rely on a small range of responses again and again, whether or not they are successful.
Ability to Choose the Most Appropriate Behavior  Simply possessing a large range of communication skills is no guarantee of success. It’s also necessary to know which of these skills will work best in a particular situation. This ability to choose the best approach is essential because a response that works well in one setting would flop miserably in another one.

Although it’s impossible to say precisely how to act in every situation, there are at least three factors to consider when you are deciding which response to choose. The first factor is the communication context. The time and place will almost always influence how you act. Asking your boss for a raise or your lover for a kiss might produce good results if the time is right, but the identical request might backfire if your timing is poor. Likewise, the joke that would be ideal at a bachelor party would probably be inappropriate at a funeral.

Your goal will also shape the approach you take. Inviting a new neighbor over for a cup of coffee or dinner could be just the right approach if you want to encourage a friendship; but if you want to maintain your privacy, it might be wiser to be polite but cool. Likewise, your goal will determine your approach in situations in which you want to help another person. As you will learn in Chapter 7, there are times when offering advice is just what is needed. But when you want to help others develop the ability to solve problems on their own, it’s better to withhold your own ideas and function as a sounding board to let them consider alternatives and choose their solutions.

Finally, your knowledge of the other person should shape the approach you take. If you’re dealing with someone who is very sensitive or insecure, your response might be supportive and cautious. With an old and trusted friend you might be blunt. The social niche of the other party can also influence how you communicate. For instance, you would probably act differently toward an 80-year-old person than you would toward a teenager. Likewise, there are times when it’s appropriate to treat a man differently than a woman, even in this age of gender equity.

Skill at Performing Behaviors  After you have chosen the most appropriate way to communicate, it’s still necessary to perform the required skills effectively. There is a big difference between knowing about a skill and being able to put it into practice. Simply being aware of alternatives isn’t much help unless you can skillfully put these alternatives to work.

Just reading about communication skills in the following chapters won’t guarantee that you can start using them flawlessly. As with any other skills—playing a musical instrument or learning a sport, for example—the road to competence in communication is not a short one. As you learn and practice the communication skills in the following pages, you can expect to pass through several stages, shown in Figure 1.3.
Looking at Diversity

Daria Muse: Competent Communication in Suburbia and the Inner City

In this profile Daria Muse describes how effective communication varies in two strikingly different environments: her home neighborhood of South-Central Los Angeles and her school in the suburban San Fernando Valley. This account demonstrates some of the elements of communication competence introduced in Chapter 1: a wide range of behaviors, the ability to choose the best behavior for a given situation, and skill at performing that behavior.

During my elementary and middle-school years, I was a well-behaved, friendly student at school and a tough, hard-nosed “bad girl” in my neighborhood. This contrast in behavior was a survival tool, for I lived in a part of South-Central Los Angeles where “goody-goodies” aren’t tolerated, and I attended school in Northridge, where trouble-makers aren’t tolerated.

Beckford Ave. Elementary School was in the heart of middle-class suburbia, and I, coming from what has been described as the “urban jungle,” was bused there every day for six years.

In a roundabout way, I was told from the first day of school that if I wanted to continue my privileged attendance in the hallowed classrooms of Beckford, I would have to conform and adapt to their standards. I guess I began to believe all that they said because slowly I began to conform.

Instead of wearing the tight jeans and T-shirt that were the style in South-Central at the time, I wore schoolgirl dresses like those of my female classmates. I even changed my language. When asking a question, instead of saying, “Boy! Gimme those scissors before I knock you up you head!” in school, I asked, “Excuse me, would you please hand me the scissors?” When giving a compliment in school I’d say, “You look very nice today,” instead of “Girl, who do you think you are, dressin’ so fine, Miss Thang.”

This conformation of my appearance and speech won me the acceptance of my proper classmates at Beckford Elementary School, but after getting off the school bus and stepping onto the sidewalks of South-Central, my appearance quit being an asset and became a dangerous liability.

One day, when I got off the school bus, a group of tough girls who looked as though they were part of a gang approached me, looked at my pink and white lace dress, and accused me of trying to “look white.” They surrounded me and demanded a response that would prove to them that I was still loyal to my black heritage. I screamed, “Lay off me, girl, or I’ll bust you in the eyes so bad that you’ll need a telescope just to see!” The girls walked away without causing any more trouble.

From then on, two personalities emerged. I began living a double life. At school I was prim and proper in appearance and in speech, but during the drive on the school bus from Northridge to South-Central, my other personality emerged. Once I got off the bus I put a black jacket over my dress, I hardened my face, and roughened my speech to show everyone who looked my way that I was not a girl to be messed with. I led this double life throughout my six years of elementary school.

Now that I am older and can look back at that time objectively, I don’t regret displaying contrasting behavior in the two different environments. It was for my survival. Daria, the hard-nosed bad girl, survived in the urban jungle and Daria, the well-behaved student, survived in the suburbs.

As a teen-ager in high school I still display different personalities: I act one way in school, which is different from the way I act with my parents, which is different from the way I act with my friends, which is different from the way I act in religious services. But don’t we all? We all put on character masks for our different roles in life. All people are guilty of acting differently at work than at play and differently with co-workers than with the boss. There’s nothing wrong with having different personalities to fit different situations; the trick is knowing the real you from the characters.
Beginning Awareness  The first step in learning any new skill is a beginning awareness. This is the point at which you first learn that there is a new and better way of behaving. If you play tennis, for example, awareness might grow when you learn about a new way of serving that can improve your power and accuracy. In the area of communication, *Looking Out/Looking In* should bring this sort of awareness to you.

Awkwardness  Just as you were awkward when you first tried to ride a bicycle or drive a car, your initial attempts at communicating in new ways may also be awkward. This doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with these ways, but rather that you need more experience with them. After all, if it’s reasonable to expect difficulty learning other skills, you ought to expect the same fumbling with the concepts in this book. As Ringo Starr put it when talking about music, “Got to pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues . . . you know it don’t come easy.”

Skillfulness  If you are willing to keep working at overcoming the awkwardness of your initial attempts, you will arrive at the third learning stage, which is skillfulness. At this stage you’ll be able to handle yourself well, although you will still need to think about what you’re doing. As in learning a new language, this is the time when you’re able to speak grammatically and use the correct words, even though you still need to work hard to express yourself well. As an interpersonal communicator, you can expect the stage of skillfulness to be marked by a great deal of thinking and planning and also by good results.

Integration  Finally, after a period of time in the skillful stage, you’ll find yourself at the final stage—integration. This occurs when you’re able to perform well without thinking about it. The behavior becomes automatic, a part of you. Integrated speakers of a foreign language converse without translating mentally from their native tongue. Integrated cyclists ride skillfully and comfortably, almost as if the bike were an extension of each cyclist’s own body. And integrated communicators express themselves in skillful ways, not because they are acting self-consciously, but rather because that is who they have become.

It’s important to keep these stages in mind as you try out the ideas in this book. Prepare yourself for the inevitable awkwardness, knowing that if you’re willing to keep practicing the new skills you will become more and more comfortable and successful with them. Realize that the effort is worth it because after you have learned new methods of communicating, you’ll be rewarded with more-satisfying relationships.63

Cognitive Complexity  Social scientists use the term *cognitive complexity* to describe the ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue. Researchers have found that cognitive complexity increases the chances of having
satisfying communication among married couples, helping others who are feeling distressed, being persuasive, and achieving career advancement to name a few contexts.

To understand how cognitive complexity can increase competence, consider an example. Imagine that a longtime friend seems to be angry with you. One possible explanation is that your friend is offended by something you’ve done. Another possibility is that something has happened in another part of your friend’s life that is upsetting. Or perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you’re just being overly sensitive. Considering the issue from several angles might prevent you from overreacting or misunderstanding the situation, increasing the odds of finding a way to resolve the problem constructively. The sections on perception checking in Chapter 3, listening in Chapter 7, and preventing defensiveness in Chapter 10 provide specific tools for developing your cognitive complexity.

**Empathy**  Seeing a situation from multiple points of view is important, but there’s another step that goes beyond understanding different perspectives. Empathy involves feeling and experiencing another person’s situation, almost as they do. This ability is so important that some researchers have labeled empathy the most important aspect of communication competence. Chapters 3 and 7 introduce you to a set of skills that can boost your ability to empathize. For now, it’s enough to note that getting a feel for how others view the world is a useful and important way to become a more effective communicator.

**Self-Monitoring**  Whereas increased cognitive complexity and empathy help you understand others better, self-monitoring is one way to understand yourself better. Psychologists use the term self-monitoring to describe the process of paying close attention to one’s behavior and using these observations to shape the way one behaves. Self-monitors are able to separate a part of their consciousness and observe their behavior from a detached viewpoint, making observations such as:

> “I’m making a fool out of myself.”
> “I’d better speak up now.”
> “This approach is working well. I’ll keep it up.”

Although too much self-monitoring can be problematic (see Chapter 2), people who are aware of their behavior and the impression it makes are more skillful communicators than people who are low self-monitors. For example, they are more accurate in judging others’ emotional states, better at remembering information about others, less shy, and more assertive. By contrast, low self-monitors aren’t able even to recognize their incompetence. One study revealed that poor communicators were blissfully ignorant of their shortcomings and more likely to overestimate their skill than were better communicators. For example, experimental subjects who scored in the lowest quartile on joke-telling skills were more likely than their funnier counterparts to grossly overestimate their sense of humor.

Whereas low self-monitors may blunder through life, succeeding or failing without understanding why, high self-monitors have the detachment to ask themselves the question “How am I doing?” and to change their behavior if the answer isn’t positive.

**Commitment**  One feature that distinguishes effective communication—at least in qualitatively interpersonal relationships—is commitment. In other words,
people who seem to care about relationships communicate better than those who don’t. This care shows up in at least two ways. The first is commitment to the other person. Concern for the other person is revealed in a variety of ways: a desire to spend time with him or her instead of rushing, a willingness to listen carefully instead of doing all the talking, the use of language that makes sense to the other person, and openness to change after hearing the other person’s ideas. Effective communicators also care about the message. They appear sincere, seem to know what they are talking about, and demonstrate through words and deeds that they care about what they say.

How do you measure up as a competent communicator? Competence isn’t a trait that people either have or do not have. Rather, it’s a state that we achieve more or less frequently. A realistic goal, then, is not to become perfect but rather to boost the percentage of time when you communicate in ways outlined in this section.

**Skill Builder**

**Check Your Competence**

Other people are often the best judges of your competence as a communicator. They can also offer useful information about how to improve your communication. Find out for yourself by following these steps:

1. Choose a person with whom you have an important relationship.
2. In cooperation with this person, identify several contexts in which you communicate. For example, you might choose different situations such as “handling conflicts,” “lending support to friends,” or “expressing feelings.”
3. For each situation, have your friend rate your competence by answering the following questions:
   a. Do you have a wide repertoire of response styles in this situation, or do you always respond in the same way?
   b. Are you able to choose the most effective way of behaving for the situation at hand?
   c. Are you skillful at performing behaviors? (Note that knowing how you want to behave isn’t the same as being able to behave.)
   d. Do you communicate in a way that leaves others satisfied?
4. After reviewing your partner’s answers, identify the situations in which your communication is most competent.
5. Choose a situation in which you would like to communicate more competently, and with the help of your partner:
   a. Determine whether your repertoire of behaviors needs to be expanded.
   b. Identify the ways in which you need to communicate more skillfully.
   c. Develop ways to monitor your behavior in the key situation to get feedback on your effectiveness.
Throughout history, most people lived and died within a few miles of where they were born. They rarely had much to do with people from different backgrounds. Today is a different story. To use a familiar metaphor, we live in a “global village,” our lives intertwined with people from very different personal histories and communication styles.

Relatively cheap transportation has reduced the barrier of distance, making international travel easier for more people than ever before, and cell phones and the Internet have made it possible to meet and keep in touch with people from almost anywhere on earth.

Immigration and birth patterns have changed the ethnic makeup of the United States and other Western countries. For example, the population of Miami is two-thirds Hispanic; the same percentage of Washington, D.C. residents are African-American, and one-third of San Franciscans are Asian Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the nation’s Hispanic and Asian populations will triple over the next half-century, and non-Hispanic whites will represent about one-half of the total population by 2050.

As our world becomes more multicultural, the likelihood of working with people from different parts of the world is greater than ever. Over 10,000 foreign companies and their subsidiaries operate in the United States. Eight of the 10 leading chemical companies, 9 of the 10 leading banks, and all of the leading construction companies are based outside the U.S. At the same time the North American economy becomes more global and more Americans are working abroad. Over eight million were working overseas in 2003, many for the 3,000 U.S. firms with global operations and others for over 36,000 foreign companies in more than 180 countries.

National and ethnic differences aren’t the only dimensions of culture. Within a society co-cultures have different communication practices. Consider just a few co-cultures:

- age (e.g., teen, senior citizen)
- race/ethnicity (e.g., Asian American, Puerto Rican)
- occupation (fashion model, long-distance trucker)
- sexual orientation (lesbian, gay male)
- physical disability (e.g., wheelchair user, deaf)
- religion (e.g., Evangelical Christian, Muslim)
- activity (e.g., biker, gamer)

Some scholars have even characterized men and women as belonging to different co-cultures, claiming that each gender’s style of communication is distinct. We’ll have more to say about that topic throughout this book.

Communicating successfully with people from different cultural backgrounds calls for the same elements of competence outlined in the pages you have just...
read. But beyond these basic qualities, communication researchers have identified several other especially important ingredients of successful intercultural communication.78

Most obviously, it helps to know the rules of a specific culture. For example, the kind of self-deprecating humor that Americans are likely to find amusing is likely to fall flat among Arabs from the Middle East.79 But beyond knowing the specific rules of an individual culture, there are also attitudes and skills called “culture-general” that help communicators build relationships with people from other backgrounds.80

To illustrate the ingredients of culture-general communication competence, imagine you’ve just been hired to work in a Japanese-owned company in the United States that has manufacturing operations in Mexico and customers around the world. In your new job, you are surrounded by co-workers, supervisors, and clients who come from cultures and co-cultures that are different from your own. You are also required to make occasional trips abroad. How will you handle the communication demands of this position? Ideally, you’ll possess the following attributes.

**Motivation** The desire to communicate successfully with strangers is an important start. For example, people high in willingness to communicate with people from other cultures report a greater number of friends from different backgrounds than those who are less willing to reach out.81 Having the proper motivation is important in all communication, but particularly so in intercultural interactions because they can be quite challenging.

In your multinational company, you’ll need motivation to reach out to people whose communication style is different from yours. For example, during visits to China you might first be pleased, and then exhausted to discover that parties and banquets, typically with much alcohol, are part of the business scene. Even if you are a seasoned partygoer, you may need to draw on a deep well of motivation to spend yet another evening of jovially toasting strangers when you would rather be recovering from jet lag and hard work.

**Tolerance for Ambiguity** Communicating with people from different backgrounds can be confusing. A tolerance for ambiguity makes it possible to accept, and even embrace, the often equivocal and sometimes downright incomprehensible messages that characterize intercultural communication.

If you happen to work with colleagues raised in traditional Native American co-cultures, you may find them much quieter and less outgoing than you are used to. Your first reaction might be to chalk up this reticence to a lack of friendliness. However, it may just be a reflection of a co-culture in which reticence is valued more than extroversion, and silence more than loquacity. In cross-cultural situations like this, ambiguity is a fact of life, and a challenge.

**Open-Mindedness** It’s one thing to tolerate ambiguity; it’s another thing to become open-minded about cultural differences. There is a natural tendency to view others’ communication choices as “wrong” when they don’t match our cultural upbringing. In some parts of the world, you may find that women are not regarded with the same attitude of equality that is common in the West. Likewise, in other cultures, you may be aghast at the casual tolerance of poverty beyond anything at home, or with practices of bribery that don’t jibe with homegrown notions of what is ethical. In situations like these, principled communicators aren’t likely to compromise deeply held beliefs about what is right.
At the same time, competence requires an attitude that recognizes that people who behave differently are most likely following rules that have governed their whole lives. Chapter 3 will offer more guidance on the challenges of viewing the world from others’ perspectives.

**Knowledge and Skill**  The rules and customs that work with one group might be quite different from those that succeed with another. For example, when traveling in Latin America, you are likely find that meetings there usually don’t begin or end at their scheduled time, and that it takes the participants quite awhile to “get down to business.” Rather than viewing your hosts as irresponsible and unproductive, you’ll want to recognize that the meaning of time is not the same in all cultures. Likewise, the gestures others make, the distance they stand from you, and the eye contact they maintain have ambiguous meanings that you’ll need to learn and follow.

At your new job, you’ll want to engage in *mindfulness*—awareness of your own behavior and that of others. Communicators who lack this quality blunder through intercultural encounters mindlessly, oblivious of how their own behavior may confuse or offend others, and how behavior that they consider weird may be simply different. When you’re in a mindful state, you can use three strategies for moving toward a more mindful, competent style of intercultural communication. Passive observation involves noticing what behaviors members of a different culture use and using these insights to communicate in ways that are most effective. Active strategies include reading, watching films, asking experts and members of the other culture how to behave, as well as taking academic courses related to intercultural communication and diversity. The third strategy, self-disclosure, involves volunteering personal information to people from the other culture with whom you want to communicate.

One type of self-disclosure is to confess your cultural ignorance: “This is very new to me. What’s the right thing to do in this situation?” This approach is the riskiest of the three described here, since some cultures may not value candor and self-disclosure as much as others. Nevertheless, most people are pleased when strangers attempt to learn the practices of their culture, and they are usually more than willing to offer information and assistance.

**Summary**

Communication is essential on many levels. Besides satisfying practical needs, effective communication can enhance physical health and emotional well-being. As children, we learn about our identity via the messages sent by others, and as adults our self-concept is shaped and refined through social interaction. Communication also satisfies social needs: involvement with others, control over the environment, and giving and receiving affection.

The process of communication is not a linear one that people “do” to one another. Rather, communication is a transactional process in which participants create a relationship by simultaneously sending and receiving messages, many of which are distorted by various types of noise.

Interpersonal communication can be defined quantitatively by the number of people involved or qualitatively by the nature of interaction between them. In a qualitative sense, interpersonal relationships are unique, irreplaceable, interdependent, and intrinsically rewarding. Qualitatively interpersonal communication can occur in computer-mediated contexts as well as in traditional ones. Qualitatively interpersonal communication is relatively infrequent, even in the strongest relationships. Both personal and impersonal communications are useful,
and most relationships have both personal and impersonal elements.

All communication, whether personal or impersonal, content or relational, follows the same basic principles. Messages can be intentional or unintentional. It is impossible not to communicate. Communication is irreversible and unrepeatable. Messages have both a content and a relational dimension. Some common misconceptions should be avoided when thinking about communication: Meanings are not in words, but rather in people. More communication does not always make matters better. Communication will not solve all problems. Finally, communication—at least effective communication—is not a natural ability.

Communication competence is the ability to get what you are seeking from others in a manner that maintains the relationship on terms that are acceptable to all parties. Competence doesn’t mean behaving the same way in all settings and with all people; rather, competence varies from one situation to another. The most competent communicators have a wide repertoire of behaviors, and they are able to choose the best behavior for a given situation and perform it skillfully. They are able to understand others’ points of view and respond with empathy. They also monitor their own behavior and are committed to communicating successfully. In intercultural communication, competence involves having the right motivation, a tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, and the knowledge and skill to communicate effectively.

**Key Terms**

- channel (10)
- co-culture (34)
- cognitive complexity (31)
- communication (14)
- communication competence (25)
- computer-mediated communication (CMC) (21)
- content dimension (16)
- decode (10)
- dyad (18)
- encode (9)
- environment (11)
- interpersonal communication (18)
- instrumental goals (8)
- interpersonal communication (quantitative and qualitative) (18)
- linear communication model (9)
- message (10)
- noise (external, physiological, psychological) (10)
- receiver (10)
- relational dimension (16)
- self-monitoring (32)
- sender (9)
- transactional communication model (10)

**Media Resources**

**CengageNOW** For quick access to the online resources that accompany this chapter, access your CengageNOW for *Looking Out/Looking In* at academic.cengage.com. (See the pages near the inside front and back covers of this book for more about how to access and use these resources.)

The CengageNOW online study system helps you identify concepts you don’t fully understand, allowing you to put your study time to the best use. Using chapter-by-chapter diagnostic pre-tests, the system creates a personalized study plan for each chapter. Each plan directs you to specific resources designed to improve your understanding, including pages from the text in ebook format. Chapter post-tests give you an opportunity to measure how much you’ve learned and let you know if you are ready for graded quizzes and exams.

CengageNOW for *Looking Out/Looking In* also includes the ABC News video clip described on page 8; vocabulary activities to help you master key terms; self-study review quizzes to test your comprehension of the material in this chapter and prepare for exams; online exercises, including the Skill Builder and Invitation to Insight activities in the book; web links you can use to further explore topics in this chapter; access to a feature film database where you can locate information about movies that illustrate communication principles; and access to the
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InfoTrac® College Edition searchable database of over 10 million articles from both scholarly journals and the popular press.

Films and Television

In addition to the films suggested here, use the link to the CengageNOW for Looking Out/Looking In to link to the Film in Communication Database, where you can locate movie clips that illustrate various aspects of interpersonal communication.

The Importance of Interpersonal Communication

Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) is starving for human interaction. He recently retired from his job, his wife has died unexpectedly, and now he is all alone. He has no close friends or family; his life has become an exercise in quiet desperation. Warren isn’t good at building and maintaining relationships, so he reaches out for human contact in a relatively safe way: by writing lengthy letters to a Tanzanian orphan whom he “met” through a TV ad for a children’s charity. Over time, he makes (clumsy) attempts to strike up conversations with in-laws and strangers, and ultimately he tries to restore his strained relationship with his daughter. What Warren learns is that even if interpersonal communication is scary, difficult, and risky, it beats the alternative of loneliness and isolation.

Transactional Communication

Friends (TV series) Rated TV-14
This long-running television series chronicles the interconnected lives of six twenty-something (and later thirty-something) New Yorkers. Over ten seasons, dedicated viewers followed the many changes in the relationships of this group. Knowledge of their complex relational history helps viewers understand and appreciate each episode. This series illustrates the principle that communication is a transactional process. For example, the other characters’ affection for Joey and Phoebe leads them to regard their simpleminded statements with affection; Rachel’s former relationship with Ross influences their friendship; and everyone’s knowledge of Monica’s need for order and cleanliness allows them to not take her neurotic comments personally.

Communication Competence

The Office (TV series) Rated TV-14
This TV mock documentary portrays the world of the cubicle jockeys at Dunder Mifflin Paper Supply Company in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Most of the action centers on the exploits of regional manager Michael Scott (Steve Carell). Michael believes he is funny, a fountain of business wisdom, and revered by his staff. In truth, his misguided sense of humor and bumbling management style make him an object of ridicule. From a communication perspective, Michael is a paragon of poor self-monitoring and incompetent communication.

New Zealander Burt Munro (Anthony Hopkins) has always dreamed of riding his 1920 Indian motorcycle during Speed Week at Utah’s Bonneville Salt Flats. In his 60s, and against all the odds, Burt sets out to live his dream. Along the way, he meets a diverse array of characters including a motorcycle gang, a transvestite hotel clerk, a Latino car salesman, a Native American who lives in the desert, and a U.S. Air Force officer on leave from dropping napalm in Vietnam. In all these encounters, Burt exhibits the kind of intercultural competence described in this chapter. He is extremely open-minded, and he seems quite comfortable with ambiguities that are unlike anything he encountered in his provincial New Zealand hometown. As a consequence, Burt leads a rich and rewarding life, turning potential adversaries into friends. Based on a true story.