CHAPTER ONE

Human Communication: What and Why

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Communication, as we will study it in this book, possesses three important characteristics:

- It occurs between humans
- It is a process
- It is symbolic

There are several different types of communication introduced in this chapter:

- Intrapersonal
- Dyadic/interpersonal
- Small group
- Public
- Mass

Communication helps satisfy a number of needs in our lives:

- Physical needs
- Identity needs
- Social needs
- Practical needs

Models of communication help us understand what is involved in this process.

- The linear model is familiar, but overly simplistic
- The transactional model better describes how people communicate

Communication competence is a measure of a person's effectiveness. This chapter explores competence by

- Defining the nature of competence and how it is acquired
- Outlining the characteristics of competent communicators

Clarifying certain misconceptions about communication helps us understand how the process works effectively. We will consider the following clarifications of common misconceptions:

- Communication doesn't always require complete understanding
- Communication isn't always a good thing
- No single person or event causes another's reaction
- Communication won't solve all problems
- Meanings rest in people, not words
- Communication isn't as simple as it often seems
- More communication isn't always better

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COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Because this is a book about *communication,* it makes sense to begin by defining that term. This is not as simple as it might seem because people use the term in a variety of ways that are only vaguely related:

- Family members, coworkers, and friends make such statements about their relationships as "We just can't communicate" or "We communicate perfectly."
- Businesspeople talk about "office communications systems" consisting of computers, telephones, printers, and so on.
- Scientists study and describe communication among ants, dolphins, and other animals.
- Certain organizations label themselves "communications conglomerates," publishing newspapers, books, and magazines and owning radio and television stations.

There is clearly some relationship among uses of the term such as these, but we need to narrow our focus before going on. A look at the table of contents of this book shows that it obviously doesn't deal with animals, computers, or newspapers. Neither is it about Holy Communion, the bestowing of a material thing, or many of the other subjects mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary's* 1,200-word definition of *communication.*

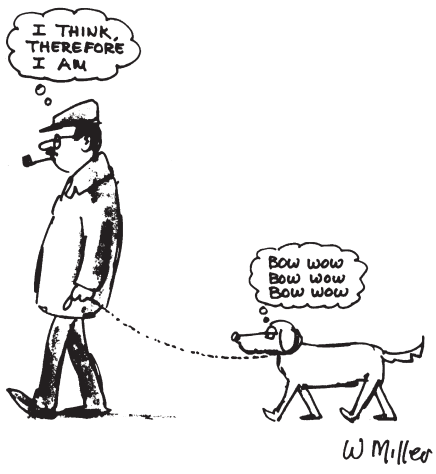
What, then, *are* we talking about when we use the term *communication?* A survey of the ways in which scholars use the word will show that there is no single, universally accepted usage. Some definitions are long and complex, whereas others are brief and simple. This isn't the place to explore the differences between these conceptions or to defend one against the others. What we need is a working definition that will help us in our study. For our purposes we will say that **communication** refers to the process of human beings responding to the symbolic behavior of other persons.

A point-by-point examination of this definition reveals some important characteristics of communication as we will be studying it.

EBSCOhost

Communication Is Human

In this book we'll be discussing communication between human beings. Animals clearly do communicate: Bees instruct their hive-mates about the location of food by a meaning-laden dance. Chimpanzees have been taught to express themselves with the same sign language used by deaf humans, and a few have developed impressive vocabularies. And on a more commonplace level, pet owners can testify to the variety of messages their animals can express. Although this subject of animal communication is fascinating and important, it goes beyond the scope of this book.[1]



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Communication Is a Process

We often talk about communication as if it occurred in discrete, individual acts such as one person's utterance or a conversation. In fact, communication is a continuous, ongoing process. Consider, for example, a friend's compliment about your appearance. Your interpreta-

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THE MANY MEANINGS OF COMMUNICATION

Few words have as many meanings as communication. The term can refer to everything from messages on T-shirts to presidential speeches, from computer code to chimpanzee behavior. Communication has been the professional concern of philosophers, scientists (social, biological, and physical), poets, politicians, and entertainers, to name a few. Responding to this diversity, Brent Rubin asked, "How does being interested in communication differ from being interested in life?"

There are several reasons why the term *communication* has so many different meanings. Understanding them will help explain how and why this word refers to a broad range of subjects.

Interdisciplinary Heritage Unlike most subjects, communication has captured the interest of scholars from a wide range of fields. Ever since classical times, philosophers have studied the meaning and significance of messages. In the twentieth century, social scientists have joined the field: Psychologists examine the causes and effects of communication as it relates to individuals. Sociologists and anthropologists examine how communication operates within and between societies and cultures. Political scientists explore the ways communication influences governmental affairs. Engineers use their skill to devise methods of conveying messages electronically. Zoologists focus on communication between animals. With this kind of diversity, it's no surprise that *communication* is a broad and sometimes confusing term.

Field and Activity Sometimes the word *communication* refers to a field of study (of nonverbal messages or effects of televised violence on children, for example). In other cases it denotes an activity that people do. This confusion doesn't exist in most disciplines. People may study history or sociology, but they don't "historicate" or "sociologize." Having only one word that refers to both the field of study and the activity that it examines leads to confusion.

Humanity and Social Science Unlike most disciplines, communication straddles two very different academic domains. It has one foot firmly planted in the humanities, where it shares concerns with disciplines like English and philosophy. At the same time, other scholars in the field take an approach like their colleagues in the social sciences, such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. And to confuse matters even further, communication is sometimes associated with the performing arts, especially in the area of oral interpretation of literature.

Natural and Professional Communication This is a natural activity that we all engage in unconsciously. At the same time, there are professional communication experts whose specialized duties require training and skill. Careers such as marketing, public relations, broadcasting, speech-making, counseling, journalism, and management all call for talent that goes far beyond what is required for everyday speaking and listening.

Communication and Communications Even the name of the field is confusing. Traditionally, *communications* (with an "s") has been used when referring to activities involving technology and the mass media. *Communication* is typically used to describe face-to-face and written messages, as well as the field as a whole. With the growth of communication technology, the two terms are being used interchangeably more often.

Brent Rubin
Communication and Human Behavior

tion of those words will depend on a long series of experiences stretching far back in time: How have others judged your appearance? How do you feel about your looks? How honest has your friend been in the past? How have you been feeling about one another recently? All this history will help shape your response to the friend's remark. In turn, the words you speak and the way you say them will shape the way your friend behaves toward you and others—both in this situation and in the future.

This simple example shows that it's inaccurate to talk about "acts" of communication as if they occurred in isolation. To put it differently, communication isn't a series of incidents pasted together like photographs in a scrapbook; instead,

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CULTURAL IDIOM

tune into: focus on

it is more like a motion picture in which the meaning comes from the unfolding of an interrelated series of images. The fact that communication is a process is reflected in the transactional model introduced later in this chapter.

Communication Is Symbolic

Symbols are used to represent things, processes, ideas, or events in ways that make communication possible. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of symbols in more detail, but this idea is so important that it needs an introduction now. The most significant feature of symbols is their *arbitrary* nature. For example, there's no logical reason why the letters in the word *book* should stand for the object you're reading now. Speakers of Spanish call it a *libro,* and Germans call it a *Buch.* Even in English, another term would work just as well as long as everyone agreed to use it in the same way. We overcome the arbitrary nature of symbols by linguistic rules and customs. Effective communication depends on agreement among people about these rules. This is easiest to see when we observe people who don't follow linguistic conventions. For example, recall how unusual the speech of children and immigrant speakers of a language often sounds.

We've already talked about words as one type of symbol. In addition, nonverbal behavior can have symbolic meaning. As with words, some nonverbal behaviors, though arbitrary, have clearly agreed-upon meanings. For example, to most North Americans, nodding your head up and down means "yes" (although this meaning isn't universal). But even more than words, many nonverbal behaviors are ambiguous. Does a frown signify anger or unhappiness? Does a hug stand for a friendly greeting or a symbol of the hugger's romantic interest in you? One can't always be sure. We'll discuss the nature of nonverbal communication in Chapter 5.

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

MUST COMMUNICATION BE INTENTIONAL?

Some theorists believe that any behavior that has meaning to others should be considered communication, whether it is intentional or not. To them, an involuntary grimace or overheard remark is worthy of studying. Other scholars believe that only messages that are intentionally sent and received should be considered communication. They argue that the broader definition means that the study of communication has no boundaries. Which position do you take? Be prepared to support your viewpoint in a discussion with others who hold the opposing viewpoint.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

Within the domain of human interaction, there are several types of communication. Each occurs in a different context. Despite the features that all share, each has its own characteristics.

Intrapersonal Communication

By definition, **intrapersonal communication** means "communicating with oneself."[2] You can tune in to one way that each of us communicates internally by listening to the little voice that lives in your mind. Take a moment and listen to what

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it is saying. Try it now, before reading on. Did you hear it? It may have been saying something like "What little voice? I don't have any little voice!" This voice is the "sound" of your thinking.

We don't always think in verbal terms, but whether the process is apparent or not, the way we mentally process information influences our interaction with others. Thus, even though intrapersonal communication doesn't fit the "face-to-face" element of our definition of *communication,* it does affect those forms of interaction. You can understand the role of intrapersonal communication by imagining your thoughts in each of the following situations.

- You are planning to approach a stranger whom you would like to get to know better.
- You pause a minute and look at the audience before beginning a ten-minute speech.
- The boss yawns while you are asking for a raise.
- A friend seems irritated lately, and you're not sure whether you are responsible.

The way you handle all of these situations would depend on the intrapersonal communication that precedes or accompanies your overt behavior. Much of Chapter 2 deals with the perception process in everyday situations, and part of Chapter 12 focuses on the intrapersonal communication that can minimize anxiety when you deliver a speech.

Dyadic/Interpersonal Communication

Social scientists call two persons interacting a **dyad,** and they often use the term **dyadic communication** to describe this type of communication. Dyads are the most common communication setting. One study revealed that college students spend almost half of their total communication time interacting with one other person.[3] Observation in a variety of settings ranging from playgrounds, train depots, and shopping malls to other settings shows that most communication is dyadic in nature.[4] Even communication within larger groups (think of classrooms, parties, and families as examples) consists of multiple, often shifting dyadic encounters.

Dyadic interaction is sometimes considered identical to **interpersonal communication;** but as Chapter 6 explains, not all two-person interaction can be considered interpersonal in the fullest sense of the word. In fact, you will learn that the qualities that characterize interpersonal communication aren't limited to twosomes. They can be present in threesomes or even in small groups.

*When you see this icon, look for an activity at the end of the chapter that will help you understand and apply the concept you are reading about.

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operate in a vacuum: function as if there were no others around

Small Group Communication

In **small group communication** every person can participate actively with the other members. Small groups are a common fixture of everyday life. Your family is a group. So are an athletic team, a collection of fellow workers, and a group of students working on a class project.

Whatever their makeup, small groups possess characteristics that are not present in a dyad. For instance, two or more members of a group can form a coalition to defend their position against other members, whereas in a dyad the members face each other on their own, without support from others. In a group, the majority of members can put pressure on those in the minority to conform, either consciously or unconsciously; but in a dyad no such pressures exist. Conformity pressures can also be comforting, leading group members to take risks that they would not dare if they were alone or in a dyad. With their greater size, groups also have the ability to be more creative than dyads. Finally, communication in groups is affected strongly by the type of leader who is in a position of authority. Groups are such an important communication setting that Chapters 8 and 9 focus exclusively on them.

Public Communication

Public communication occurs when a group becomes too large for all members to contribute. One characteristic of public communication is an unequal amount of speaking. One or more people are likely to deliver their remarks to the remaining members, who act as an audience. This leads to a second characteristic of public settings: limited verbal feedback. The audience isn't able to talk back in a two-way conversation the way they might in a dyadic or small group setting. This doesn't mean that speakers operate in a vacuum when delivering their remarks. Audiences often have a chance to ask questions and offer brief comments, and their nonverbal reactions offer a wide range of clues about their reception of the speaker's remarks.

Public speakers usually have a greater chance to plan and structure their remarks than do communicators in smaller settings. For this reason, several chapters of this book describe the steps you can take to prepare and deliver an effective speech.

Mass Communicaton

Mass communication consists of messages that are transmitted to large, widespread audiences via electronic and print media: newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and so on. As you can see in the Mass Communication section on the CD-ROM that accompanies this book, mass communication differs from the interpersonal, small group, and public varieties in several ways. First, mass messages are aimed at a large audience without any personal contact between sender and receivers. Second, most of the messages sent via mass communication channels are developed, or at least financed, by large organizations. In this sense, mass communication is far less personal and more of a product than the other types we have examined so far. Finally, mass communication is almost always controlled by many gatekeepers who determine what messages will be delivered to consumers, how they will be constructed, and when they will be delivered. Sponsors (whether corporate or governmental), editors, producers, reporters, and execu-

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tives all have the power to influence mass messages in ways that don't affect most other types. Because of these and other unique characteristics, the study of mass communication raises special issues and deserves special treatment.

FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

Now that we have a working understanding of the term *communication,* it is important to discuss why we will spend so much time exploring this subject. Perhaps the strongest argument for studying communication is its central role in our lives. The amount of time we spend communicating is staggering. In one study, researchers measured the amount of time a sample group of college students spent on various activities.[5] They found that the subjects spent an average of over 61 percent of their waking hours engaged in some form of communication. Whatever one's occupation, the results of such a study would not be too different. Most of us are surrounded by others, trying to understand them and hoping that they understand us: family, friends, coworkers, teachers, and strangers.

*

There's a good reason why we speak, listen, read, and write so much: Communication satisfies most of our needs.

Physical Needs

Communication is so important that it is necessary for physical health. In fact, evidence suggests that an absence of satisfying communication can even jeopardize life itself. Medical researchers have identified a wide range of hazards that result from a lack of close relationships.[6] For instance:

- People who lack strong relationships have two to three times the risk of early death, regardless of whether they smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or exercise regularly.
- Terminal cancer strikes socially isolated people more often than those who have close personal relationships.
- Divorced, separated, and widowed people are five to ten times more likely to need hospitalization for mental problems than their married counterparts.
- Pregnant women under stress and without supportive relationships have three times more complications than pregnant women who suffer from the same stress but have strong social support.
- Socially isolated people are four times more susceptible to the common cold than those who have active social networks.[7]

Studies indicate that social isolation is a major risk factor contributing to coronary disease, comparable to physiological factors such as diet, cigarette smoking, obesity, and lack of physical activity.[8]

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

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well-being. To paraphrase an old song, "people who need people" aren't "the luckiest people in the world," they're the *only* people!

Identity Needs

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way—indeed, the *only* way—we learn who we are. As you'll read in Chapter 2, 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 identity. 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 while digging for vegetables in a French village garden.[9] He showed no behaviors one would expect in a social human. The boy could not speak but uttered only weird cries. More significant than this absence 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."[10] Only after the influence of a loving "mother" did the boy begin to behave—and, we can imagine, think of himself as a human. Contemporary stories support the essential role that communication plays in shaping identity. In 1970, authorities discovered a twelve-year-old girl (whom they called "Genie") who had spent virtually all her life in an otherwise empty, darkened bedroom with almost no human contact. The child could not speak and had no sense of herself as a person until she was removed from her family and "nourished" by a team of caregivers.[11]

Like Genie and 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 ways 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. Chapter 2 also explains how we use communication to manage the way others view us.

Some scholars have argued that we are most attracted to people who confirm our identity.[12] This confirmation can come in different forms, depending on the self-image of the communicator. People with relatively high self-esteem seek out others who confirm their value and, as much as possible, avoid those who treat them poorly. Conversely, people who regard themselves as unworthy may look for relationships in which others treat them badly. This principle offers one explanation for why some people maintain damaging or unsuccessful relationships. If you view yourself as a loser, you may associate with others who will confirm that self-perception. Of course, relationships can change a communicator's identity as well as confirm it. Supportive relationships can transform feelings of inadequacy into self-respect, and damaging ones can lower self-esteem.

The role of communication in shaping identity works in a second way. Besides others' messages shaping who we think we are, the messages we create often are attempts (some more conscious than others) to get others to view us the way we want to be seen. For example, the choices we make about how to dress and otherwise shape our appearance are almost always attempts to manage our identity.

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Social Needs

Besides helping to define who we are, communication provides a vital link with others. Researchers and theorists have identified a range of social needs we satisfy by communicating: *pleasure* (e.g., "because it's fun," "to have a good time"); *affection* (e.g., "to help others," "to let others know I care"); *inclusion* (e.g., "because I need someone to talk to or be with," "because it makes me less lonely"); *escape* (e.g., "to put off doing something I should be doing"); *relaxation* (e.g., "because it allows me to unwind"); and *control* (e.g., "because I want someone to do something for me," "to get something I don't have").[13]

As you look at this list of social needs for communicating, imagine how empty your life would be if these needs weren't satisfied. Then notice that it would be impossible to fulfill them without communicating with others. 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 as the "human career."[14]

> Whether the consequence of a mental attitude or a living condition, loneliness affects millions, usually for the worse. Death certificates read heart attack, cancer, or suicide; but coroners are missing the point. With no one to love or to love us, we tend to smoke, drink, brood, or simply cry ourselves into earlier graves.
>
> Don E. Hamachek
> *Encounters with Others*

Practical Needs

We shouldn't overlook the everyday, important functions that communication serves. Communication is the tool that lets us tell the hair stylist to take just a little off the sides, direct the doctor to where it hurts, and inform the plumber that the broken pipe needs attention *now!*

Beyond these obvious needs, a wealth of research demonstrates that communication is an important key to effectiveness in a variety of everyday settings. For example, a survey of over four hundred employers identified "communication skills" as the top characteristic that employers seek in job candidates.[15] It was rated as more important than technical competence, work experience, or academic background. In another survey, over 90 percent of the personnel officials at five hundred U.S. businesses stated that increased communication skills are needed for success in the twenty-first century.[16]

Communication is just as important outside of work. College roommates who are both willing and able to communicate effectively report higher satisfaction with one another than do those who lack these characteristics.[17] Married couples who were identified as effective communicators reported happier relationships than did less skillful husbands and wives.[18] In school, the grade point averages of college students were related positively to their communication competence.[19] In "getting acquainted" situations, communication competence played a major role in whether a person was judged physically attractive, socially desirable, and good at the task of getting acquainted.[20]

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MODELING COMMUNICATION

So far we have introduced a basic definition of *communication* and seen the functions it performs. This information is useful, but it only begins to describe the process we will be examining throughout this book. One way to understand more about what it means to communicate is to look at some models that describe what happens when two or more people interact. As you will see, over the last half-century scholars have developed an increasingly accurate and sophisticated view of this process.

A Linear Model

Until about fifty years ago, researchers viewed communication as something that one person "does" to another.[21] In this **linear communication model,** communication is like giving an injection: a **sender encodes** ideas and feelings into some sort of **message** and then conveys them to a **receiver** who **decodes** them. (Figure 1–1.)

One important element of the linear model is the communication **channel**—the method by which a message is conveyed between people. For most people, face-to-face contact is the most familiar and obvious channel. Writing is another channel. In addition to these long-used forms, **mediated communication** channels include telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, faxes, voice mail, and even videoconferencing. (The word *mediated* reflects the fact that these messages are conveyed through some sort of communication medium.)

The channel you choose can make a big difference in the effect of a message. For example, a typewritten love letter probably wouldn't have the same effect as a handwritten note or card. Likewise, ending a relationship by leaving a message on your ex-lover's answering machine would make a very different statement than delivering the bad news in person. Table 1–1 on page 13 and the Understanding Communication Technology box on page 14 show how some communicators can improve the quality of relationships by choosing channels that have the best chance of success.

The linear model also introduces the concept of **noise**—a term used by social scientists to describe any forces that interfere with effective communication. Noise can occur at every stage of the communication process. Three types of noise can disrupt communication—external, physiological, and psychological. *Ex-*

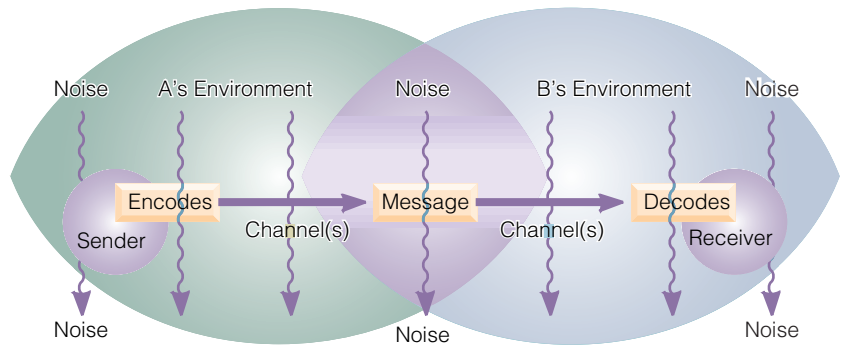

Figure 1-1 Linear Communication Model

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TABLE 1-1 Factors to Consider When Choosing a Communication Channel

	Time Required for Feedback	Amount of Information Conveyed	Sender's Control Over How Message Is Composed	Control Over Receiver's Attention	Effectiveness for Detailed Messages
Face-to-face	Immediate (after contact established)	Highest	Moderate	Highest	Weak
Telephone	Immediate (after contact established)	Vocal, but not visual	Moderate	Less than in face-to-face setting	Weakest
Voice mail	Delayed	Vocal, but not visual	Higher (since receiver can't interrupt)	Low	Weak
E-mail	Delayed	Lowest (text only, no formatting)	High	Low	Better
Instant messaging	Immediate	Lowest (text only, no formatting)	High	Modest	Weak
Hard copy (e.g., handwritten or typed message)	Delayed	Words, numbers, and images, but no nonverbal cues	Highest	Low	Good

Adapted from R. B. Adler and J. M. Elmhorst, *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions,* 8th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), pp. 32–33.

ternal noise (also called "*physical*") includes those factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, too much cigarette smoke in a crowded room might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person, and sitting in the rear of an auditorium might make a speaker's remarks unclear. External noise can disrupt communication almost anywhere in our model—in the sender, channel, message, or receiver. *Physiological noise* involves biological factors in the receiver or sender that interfere with accurate reception: illness, fatigue, and so on. *Psychological noise* refers to forces within a communicator that interfere with the ability to express or understand a message accurately. For instance, an outdoors person might exaggerate the size and number of the fish he caught in order to convince himself and others of his talents. In the same way, 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.

A linear model shows that communicators often occupy different **environments**—fields of experience that help them understand others' behavior. In communication terminology, *environment* refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural backgrounds that participants bring to a conversation.

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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

IM-ING: NOW IT'S ALL IN THE FAMILY

Nina Gordon types out an instant message and sends it. The data travels some 500 miles, from the computer in her living room in Queens, N.Y., to America Online's servers in Northern Virginia, and then to her son Schuyler's computer, which just happens to be in the next room—about 20 feet away from where she is sitting.

you hungry for dinner?

After a little online banter over dining options, her son, a 17-year-old with a wicked sense of humor and no shortage of attitude, sends his request:

an insty pizza and a beer

don't push your luck, comes the reply.

Although it might seem silly to send electronic messages instead of getting out of a chair and walking into the next room, some psychologists say that the role of instant messaging within families can be remarkably positive. In many cases, they say, the messages are helping to break down barriers between parents and their children.

"Conversation between parents and teenagers could be highly emotional and not necessarily productive,"says Elisheva F. Gross, a psychologist at the University of California at Los Angeles. When young people are online, however, "it's their turf," she says. "It may be a way for parents to communicate in a language and in a space that their children are more comfortable with."

Teenagers already use online communications to take on difficult topics with one another, says Katelyn McKenna, a psychology professor at New York University. Preliminary results from a study she conducted last year, she says, suggest that "they are able to talk with one another about issues that bother them more readily online than when they are talking face-to-face."

Lissa Parsonnet of Short Hills, N.J., says that her daughter, Dorrie, is sometimes more open to talking with her and her husband online about difficult subjects, like conflicts with friends, than she is in person. "She talks to us as if we're people, not parents,"Parsonnet says. Parsonnet, a psychotherapist, says that the online back channel strips away some of the parts of face-to-face communication that complicate matters: "They don't see you turning red,"she says. "They don't see you turning cross—all the things that will shut them up immediately."

Both instant messages and e-mail messages can help smooth things over after a fight, says Nora Gross, 17, of New York City, who says that electronic communications have helped strengthen her relationship with her father. "I can remember a few times when we've had little blowups and sent apology letters over e-mail,"she says.

While instant messages and e-mail may helpfully supplement face-to-face discussion, experts warn that it should not be relied on as the principal means of communication.

"The question,"says Sherry Turkle, a technology researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "is whether you can use it constructively to bring it back to the face-to-face."

John Schwartz

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

- A might belong to one ethnic group and 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.

Environments aren't always obvious. For example, one study revealed that college students who have been enrolled in debate classes become more argumentative and verbally aggressive than those who have not been exposed to this environment.[22]

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Notice how the model in Figure 1–1 shows that the environments of A and B overlap. This area represents the background that the communicators must 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 nondominant co-cultures, whose own perspectives make it hard to understand the cultural blindness of the majority.

Differing environments make understanding others challenging but certainly not impossible. Hard work and many of the skills described in this book provide ways to bridge the gap that separates all of us to a greater or lesser degree. For now, recognizing the challenge that comes from dissimilar environments is a good start. You can't solve a problem until you recognize that it exists.

A Transactional Model

Despite its simplicity, the linear model doesn't do a very good job of representing the way most communication operates. The **transactional communication model** in Figure 1–2 presents a more accurate picture in several respects.

SIMULTANEOUS SENDING AND RECEIVING Although some types of mass communication do flow in a one-way, linear manner, most types of personal communication are two-way exchanges.[23] The transactional model reflects the fact that we usually send and receive messages simultaneously. The roles of sender and receiver that seemed separate in the linear model are now superimposed and

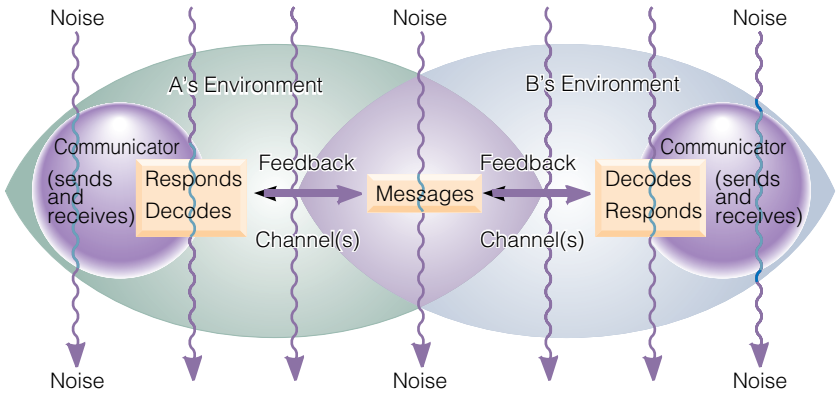

Figure 1-2 Transactional Communication Model

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redefined as those of "communicators." This new term reflects the fact that at a given moment we are capable of receiving, decoding, and responding to another person's behavior, while at the same time that other person is receiving and responding to ours.

Consider, for instance, the significance of a friend's yawn as you describe your romantic problems. Or imagine the blush you may see as you tell one of your raunchier jokes to a new acquaintance. Nonverbal behaviors like these show that most face-to-face communication is a two-way affair. The discernible response of a receiver to a sender's message is called **feedback.** Not all feedback is nonverbal, of course. Sometimes it is oral, as when you ask an instructor questions about an upcoming test or volunteer your opinion of a friend's new haircut. In other cases it is written, as when you answer the questions on a midterm exam or respond to a letter from a friend. Figure 1–2 makes the importance of feedback clear. It shows that most communication is, indeed, a two-way affair.

Another weakness of the traditional linear model is the questionable assumption that all communication involves encoding. We certainly do choose symbols to convey most verbal messages. But what about the many nonverbal cues that occur whether or not people speak: facial expressions, gestures, postures, vocal tones, and so on? Cues like these clearly do offer information about others, although they are often unconscious and thus don't involve encoding. For this reason, the transactional model replaces the term *encodes* with the broader term *responds,* because it describes both intentional and unintentional actions that can be observed and interpreted.[24]

COMMUNICATION IS FLUID, NOT STATIC Besides illustrating the simultaneous nature of face-to-face interaction, the example we just considered shows that it's difficult to isolate a single discrete "act" of communication from the events that precede and follow it. The way a friend or family member reacts to a sarcastic remark you make will probably depend on the way you have related to one another in the past. Likewise, the way you'll act toward each other in the future depends on the outcome of this conversation. Research conducted on partners in romantic relationships confirms the importance of context. As communication researcher Steve Duck put it, "Relationships are best conceived . . . as unfinished business."[25]

COMMUNICATION IS RELATIONAL, NOT INDIVIDUAL The transactional model shows that communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is something we do *with* them. In this sense, 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 isn't something that depends just on the skill of one person. A great dancer who doesn't consider and adapt to the skill level of his or her partner can make both people look bad. In communication and dancing, even two talented partners don't guarantee success. When two talented 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 because of its cooperative, transactional nature. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners.

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Psychologist Kenneth Gergen captures the relational nature of communication well when he points out how our success depends on interaction with others. As he says,". . . 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."[26]

Because communication is transactional, it's often a mistake to suggest that just one person is responsible for a relationship. Consider the accompanying cartoon. Both Cathy and Irving had good intentions, and both probably could have handled the situation better. As the humorous outcome shows, trying to pin the blame for a disappointing outcome on one person or the other is fruitless and counterproductive. It would have been far better to ask, "How did *we* handle this situation poorly, and what can *we* do to make it better?"

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The transactional nature of communication shows up in school, where teachers and students influence one another's behavior. For example, teachers who regard some students negatively may treat them with subtle or overt disfavor. As a result, these students are likely to react to their teachers' behavior negatively, which reinforces the teachers' original attitudes and expectations.[27] It isn't necessary to resolve the "who started it" issue here to recognize that the behaviors of teachers and students are part of a transactional relationship.

The transactional character of communication also figures 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 truth, the question of good parenting isn't quite so clear. 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 other way around.[28] 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 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 who communicate with one another—act in ways that mutually influence one another. The transactional na-

CULTURAL IDIOM

pin the blame: claim the fault lies with

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ture of relationships is worth reemphasizing: We don't communicate *to* others, we communicate *with* them.

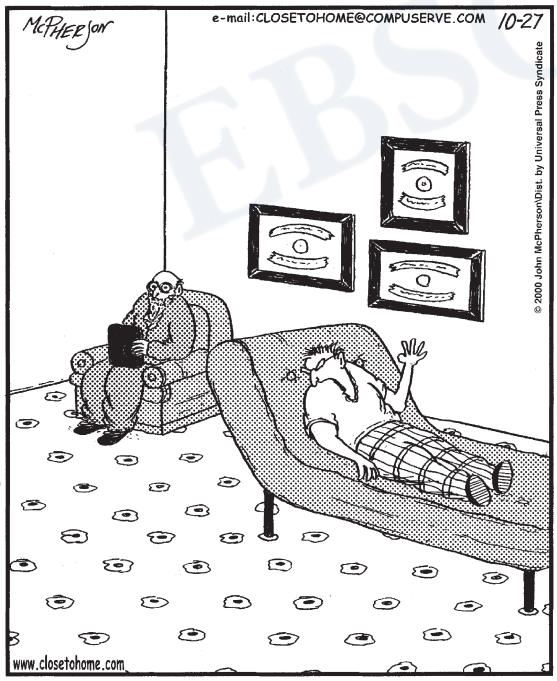
By now you can see that a transactional model of communication should be more like a motion picture film than a gallery of still photographs. Although Figure 1–2 does a fair job of picturing the phenomenon we call communication, an animated version in which the environments, communicators, and messages constantly change would be an even better way of capturing the process.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: 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.[29] Although all the answers aren't yet in, research has identified a great deal of important and useful 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.[30] This definition may seem both vague and verbose, but a closer look shows that it suggests several important characteristics of communication competence.



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"I SAID, 'I have trouble developing close relationships with people!' For cryin' out loud, clean out your ears, fathead!"

THERE IS NO "IDEAL" WAY TO COMMUNICATE Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful people are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, whereas others are quiet; and some are straightforward, whereas others hint diplomatically. Just as there are many kinds of beautiful music and art, there are many kinds of competent communication.

The type of communication that succeeds in one situation might be a colossal blunder in another. The joking insults you routinely trade with a friend might be insensitive and discouraging if he or she had just suffered a personal setback. The language you use with your peers might offend a family member, and last Saturday night's romantic approach would probably be out of place at work on Monday morning. For this reason, being a competent communicator requires flexibility in understanding what approach is likely to work best in a given situation.[31]

Cultural differences also illustrate the principle that there is no single model of competence. What qualifies

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as competent behavior in one culture might be completely inept, or even offensive, in another.[32] On an obvious level, customs like belching after a meal or appearing nude in public, which 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 being 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.[33] Even within a single society, members of various cocultures may have different notions of appropriate behavior. One study revealed that ideas of how good friends should communicate varied from one ethnic group to another.[34] As a group, Latinos valued relational support most highly, whereas African Americans valued respect and acceptance. Asian Americans emphasized 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 sure-fire list of rules or tips that will guarantee your success as a communicator. They also suggest that competent communicators are able to adapt their style to suit the individual and cultural preferences of others.[35]

CULTURAL IDIOM

sure-fire: certain to succeed

Because many behaviors can work in a given situation, it's a mistake to suggest that any single approach is superior to others. Throughout this book, you will be introduced to a variety of communication skills. Although all of them are likely to be effective at one time or another, they aren't meant to replace other approaches that you already use. The skills you learn from this book will broaden your repertoire of choices about how to communicate. When you combine them with other approaches, you'll be likely to recognize a change for the better in your interactions with others.

COMPETENCE IS SITUATIONAL 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 possesses or lacks. It's more accurate to talk about *degrees* or *areas* of competence.[36] You and the people you know are probably quite competent in some areas and less so in others. You might deal quite skillfully with peers, for example, but feel clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, wealthier or poorer, or more or less attractive than yourself. In fact, your competence with one person may vary from one situation to another. This means that it's an overgeneralization to say, in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" It would be 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 them, behavior that is competent in one relationship isn't necessarily competent in others.

A fascinating study on relational satisfaction illustrates that what constitutes satisfying communication varies from one relationship to another.[37] Researchers Brent Burleson and Wendy Sampter hypothesized that people with sophisticated communication skills (such as managing conflict well, giving ego-support to others, and providing comfort to relational partners) would be better at maintaining friendships than would be less skilled communicators. To their surprise, the results did not support this hypothesis. In fact, friendships were most satisfying when partners possessed matching skill levels. Apparently, relational satisfaction arises in part when our style matches those of the people with whom we interact.

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UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

FRONT PORCH ETIQUETTE IN LAKE WOBEGON

In this excerpt from his book *Lake Wobegon Days,* Garrison Keillor explains one facet of small-town Minnesota etiquette. This section illustrates the degree to which communication competence involves understanding unwritten rules, which often vary from one region or coculture to another.

- Even if you're screened from public view, it's polite to call out hello to passersby you know. It's up to them to stop or not. It's up to you to invite them in or not. The porch is a room of your house, not part of the yard. Only peddlers or certain ministers would barge right in.
- If you say "Why don't you come up and sit for a bit?," it is customary for them to decline politely. If the invite was legit, it should be repeated.
- An invite to the porch is not an invite to the house. Its terms are limited to a brief visit on the porch, no refreshments necessarily provided unless the occupants have such at hand.
- When the host stands up and stretches or says, "Well—," the visitor should need no further signal that the visit has ended. Only an oaf would remain longer. If the host says, "You don't have to run, do you?," this is not a question but a pleasantry.

Garrison Keillor

The same principle holds true in the case of jealousy. Researchers have uncovered a variety of ways by which people deal with jealousy in their relationships.[38] The ways included keeping closer tabs on the partner, acting indifferent, decreasing affection, talking the matter over, and acting angry. The researchers found that no type of behavior was effective or ineffective in every relationship. They concluded that approaches that work with some people 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.[39]

COMPETENCE CAN BE LEARNED To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication style.[40] Studies of identical and fraternal twins suggest that traits including sociability, anger, and relaxation seem to be partially a function of our genetic makeup. Fortunately, biology isn't the only factor that shapes how we communicate: Communication is a set of skills that anyone can learn. As children grow, their ability to communicate effectively develops. For example, older children can produce more sophisticated persuasive attempts than can younger ones.[41] Along with maturity, systematic education (such as the class in which you are now enrolled) can boost communicative competence. Even a modest amount of training can produce dramatic results. After only thirty minutes of instruction, one group of observers became significantly more effective in detecting deception in interviews.[42] Even without systematic training, it's possible to develop communication skills through the processes of trial-and-error and observation. We learn from our own successes and failures, as well as from observing other models—both positive and negative. One study revealed that the passage of time does lead to improved communication skill: College students' communication competence increases over their undergraduate studies.[43]

CULTURAL IDIOM

keeping closer tabs on: paying close attention to

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Characteristics of Competent Communicators

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

CULTURAL IDIOM

common denominators: similar or alike features

counting on: depending on

soften the blow of: ease the effect of

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 discriminatory ones—that you find offensive. You could respond to these jokes in a number of ways. You could:

- Say nothing, figuring that the risks of bringing the subject up would be greater than the benefits.
- Ask a third party to say something to the joke teller about the offensiveness of the jokes.
- Hint at your discomfort, hoping that your friend would get the point.
- Joke about your friend's insensitivity, counting on humor to soften the blow of your criticism.
- Express your discomfort in a straightforward way, asking your friend to stop telling the offensive jokes, at least around you.
- Simply 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 had 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 array of communication skills isn't a guarantee of effectiveness. It's also necessary to know which of these skills will work best in a particular situation. Choosing the best way to send a message is rather like choosing a gift: What is appropriate for one person won't be appropriate for another one at all. 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 context, your goal, and the other person.

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.

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I witnessed recently a striking and barely believable example of such [inappropriate] behavior at a wedding ceremony. One of the guests said loud enough for those of us on my side of the chapel to hear, "Think it through, Jerry" just at the point where the rabbi had asked Jerry if he took this woman to be his lawful wedded wife, according to (no less) the laws of Moses and Israel. So far as I could tell, the wedding guest was not drunk or embittered. He merely mistook the synagogue for Shea Stadium . . .

Neil Postman
Crazy Talk, Stupid Talk

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. You can expect that your first efforts at communicating differently will be awkward. After some practice you will become more skillful, although you will still have to think about the new way of speaking or listening. Finally, after repeating the new skill again and again, you will find you can perform it without conscious thought.

EMPATHY/PERSPECTIVE TAKING People have the best chance of developing an effective message when they understand the other person's point of view. And because others aren't always good at expressing their thoughts and feelings clearly, the ability to imagine how an issue might look from the other's point of view is an important skill. The value of taking the other's perspective suggests one reason why listening is so important. Not only does it help us understand others, but also it gives us information to develop strategies about how to best influence them. Because empathy is such an important element of communicative competence, much of Chapter 4 is devoted to this topic.

COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY Cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue. Cognitive complexity is an ingredient of communication competence because it allows us to make sense of people using a variety of perspectives. For instance, 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 upsetting has happened in another part of your friend's life. Or perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you're just being overly sensitive. Researchers have found that the ability to analyze the behavior of others in a variety of ways leads to greater "conversational sensitivity," increasing the chances of acting in ways that will produce satisfying results.[44]

SELF-MONITORING 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."

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UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

CALL CENTERS AND CULTURE

In a sleek new office building, two dozen young Indians are studying the customs of a place none of them has ever seen. One by one, the students present their conclusions about this fabled land.

"Americans eat a lot of junk food. Table manners are very casual,"says Ritu Khanna.

"People are quite self-centered. The average American has 13 credit cards," says Nerissa Dcosta.

"Seventy-six percent of the people mistrust the government. In the near future, this figure is expected to go up to 100 percent," says Sunny Trama.

The Indians, who range in age from 20 to 27, have been hired to take calls from cranky or distraught Americans whose computers have gone haywire. To do this, they need to communicate in a language that is familiar but a culture that is foreign.

"We're not saying India is better or America is better," says their trainer, Alefiya Rangwala. "We just want to be culturally sensitive so there's no disconnect when someone phones for tech support."

Call centers took root here during the 2001 recession, when U.S. companies were struggling to control expenses. By firing American customer service workers and hiring Indians, the firms slashed their labor costs by 75%.

At first, training was simple. The centers gave employees names that were acceptable to American ears, with Arjun becoming Aaron and Sangita becoming Susan. The new hires were instructed to watch "Friends"and "Ally McBeal" to get an idea of American folkways.

But whether Aaron and Susan were repairing computers, selling long-distance service or fulfilling orders for diet tapes, problems immediately cropped up. The American callers often wanted a better deal or an impossibly swift resolution and were aggressive and sometimes abrasive about saying so.

The Indians responded according to their own deepest natures:They were silent when they didn't understand, and they often committed to more than their employers could deliver. They would tell the Americans that someone would get back to them tomorrow to check on their problems, and no one would.

Customer satisfaction plummeted. The U.S. clients grew alarmed. Some even returned their business to U.S. call centers.

Realizing that a new multibillion-dollar industry with 150,000 employees was at risk, Indian call centers have recently embarked on much more comprehensive training. New hires are taught how to express empathy, strategies to successfully open and close conversations, and above all how to be assertive, however unnatural it might feel.

"We like to please," says Aparajita Ajit, whose title is "head of talent transformation" for the call-center firm Mphasis. "It's very difficult for us to say no."

Originally, the ever-agreeable Indian agents had a hard time getting people to pay bills that were six months overdue. Too often, says trainer Deepa Nagraj, the calls would go like this:

"Hi," the Indian would say. "I'd like to set up a payment to get your account current. Can I help you do that?"

"No," the American responds.

"OK, let me know if you change your mind," the Indian says and hangs up.

Now, says Nagraj, the agents take no excuses.

David Streitfeld

Chapter 2 explains how too much self-monitoring can be problematic. Still, people who are aware of their behavior and the impression it makes are more skillful communicators than people who are low self-monitors.[45] 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 even able to recognize their incompetence. (Calvin, in the nearby cartoon, does a nice job of illustrating this problem.) One study revealed that poor communicators were blissfully ignorant of their shortcomings and more likely to overestimate their skill than were better communicators.[46] For example, experimental subjects who scored in the lowest quartile on joke-telling skill were more likely than their funnier counterparts to grossly overestimate their sense of humor.

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COMMITMENT TO THE RELATIONSHIP One feature that distinguishes effective communication in almost any context is commitment. People who seem to care about the relationship communicate better than those who don't.[47] This concern shows up in commitment to the other person and to the message you are expressing.

CLARIFYING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Having spent time talking about what communication is, we ought to also identify some things it is not.[48] Recognizing some misconceptions is important, not only because they ought to be avoided by anyone knowledgeable about the subject, but also because following them can get you into trouble.

Communication Does Not Always Require Complete Understanding

Most people operate on the implicit but flawed assumption that the goal of all communication is to maximize understanding between communicators. Although some understanding is necessary for us to comprehend one another's thoughts, there are some types of communication in which understanding as we usually conceive it isn't the primary goal.[49] Consider, for example:

- *Social rituals.* "How's it going?" you ask. "Great," the other person replies. The primary goal in exchanges like these is mutual acknowledgment: There's obviously no serious attempt to exchange information.
- *Many attempts to influence others.* A quick analysis of most television commercials shows that they are aimed at persuading viewers to buy products, not to understand the content of the commercial. In the same way, many of our attempts at persuading another to act as we want don't involve a desire to get the other person to understand what we want—just to comply with our wishes.

"My wife understands me."

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- *Deliberate ambiguity and deception.* When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying "I can't make it," you probably want to create the impression that the decision is really beyond your control. (If your goal was to be perfectly clear, you might say, "I don't want to get together. In fact, I'd rather do almost anything than accept your invitation.") As Chapters 3 and 6 explain in detail, we often equivocate precisely because we want to obscure our true thoughts and feelings.
- *Coordinate action.* Conversations where satisfaction doesn't depend on full understanding. The term **coordination** has been used to describe situations in which participants interact smoothly, with a high degree of satisfaction but without necessarily understanding one another well.[50] Coordination without understanding can be satisfying in far more important situations. Consider the words "I love you." This is a phrase that can have many meanings: Among other things, it can mean, "I admire you," "I feel great affection for you," "I desire you," "I am grateful to you," "I feel guilty," "I want you to be faithful to me," or even "I hope *you* love *me.*"[51] It's not hard to picture a situation in which partners gain great satisfaction—even over a lifetime—without completely understanding that the mutual love they profess actually is quite different for each of them. The cartoon on the previous page reflects the fact that better understanding can sometimes lead to *less* satisfaction. "You mean you mostly love me because I've been there for you? Hey, a *dog* is there for you!"

CULTURAL IDIOM

off-limits: barred to a designated group

At the conversational level, some scholars have compared coordinated communication to what musicians call "jamming."[52] In this sort of musical interaction, musicians play off one another, improvising melodies and riffs based on what others have contributed. There's no plan, and no attempt at understanding. Some conversations resemble this sort of jamming in several respects:

- *Coordination is more important than understanding.* The players in a jam session gain satisfaction from making music together. They focus on what they are creating together, not on understanding one another. In coordinated conversations, satisfaction comes principally from being together—laughing, joking, exchanging confidences, and telling stories. The act of conversation is more important than its content.
- *Participants follow rules.* Musicians agree on fundamentals such as the key in which they will play, the tempo, and the overall structure of the music. Communicators tacitly agree on things like the level of seriousness, amount of time they will spend, and what topics are off-limits. They may not understand the content of one another's messages, but they do understand how to behave with one another.
- *Everyone gets to solo.* In jamming, each member gets a time to take the lead, with others following. Conversations work only when the participants engage in turn-taking, giving each other time to talk.
- *Sessions go to new places.* In musical jamming, every session is unique. Likewise, no two conversations are identical in words or tone. One person's decision about what to say and how to say it triggers the other's response, which in turn results in a unique reaction. The communication is truly transactional, as described earlier.
- *Jamming builds rapport.* Musicians who jam with one another build unspoken bonds. In the same way, communicators who converse smoothly with one another feel a connection—even if the topic isn't very important or the participants don't completely understand one another.[53]

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Communication Is Not Always a Good Thing

For most people, belief in the value of communication rates somewhere close to parenthood in their hierarchy of important values. In truth, communication is neither good nor bad in itself. Rather, its value comes from the way it is used. In this sense, communication is similar to fire: Flames in the fireplace on a cold night keep you warm and create a cozy atmosphere, but the same flames can kill if they spread into the room. Communication can be a tool for expressing warm feelings and useful facts, but under different circumstances the same words and actions can cause both physical and emotional pain.

No Single Person or Event Causes Another's Reaction

Although communicative skill can often make the difference between pleasant and unpleasant 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 unfair 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

"If I could just communicate better . . ." is the sad refrain of many unhappy people who believe that if they could just express themselves better, their relationships would improve. Though this is sometimes true, it's an exaggeration to say that communicating—even communicating clearly—is a guaranteed panacea.

Meanings Rest in People, Not Words

We hinted that meanings rest in people, not in words, when we said earlier that the symbols we use to communicate are arbitrary. It's a mistake to think that, just because you use a word in one way, others will do so, too.[54] Sometimes differing interpretations of symbols are easily caught, as when we might first take the statement "He's loaded" to mean the subject has had too much to drink, only to find out that he is quite wealthy. In other cases, however, the ambiguity of words and nonverbal behaviors isn't so apparent, and thus has more far-reaching consequences. Remember, for instance, a time when someone said to you, "I'll be honest," and only later did you learn that those words hid precisely the opposite fact. In Chapter 3 you'll read a great deal more about the problems that come from mistakenly assuming that meanings rest in words.

Communication Is Not Simple

Most people assume that communication is an aptitude that people develop without the need for training—rather like breathing. After all, we've been swapping

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ideas with one another since early childhood, and there are lots of people who communicate pretty well without ever having had a class on the subject. Though this picture of communication as a natural ability seems accurate, it's actually a gross oversimplification.[55]

CULTURAL IDIOM

take for granted: give little thought to

Throughout history there have been cases of infants raised without human contact. In all these cases the children were initially unable to communicate with others when brought into society. Only after extensive teaching (and not even then in some cases) were they able to speak and understand language in ways we take for granted. But what about the more common cases of effective communicators who have had no formal training yet are skillful at creating and understanding messages? The answer to this question lies in the fact that not all education occurs in a classroom: Many people learn to communicate skillfully because they have been exposed to models of such behavior by those around them. This principle of modeling explains why children who grow up in homes with stable relationships between family members have a greater chance of developing such relationships themselves. They know how to do so because they've seen effective communication in action.

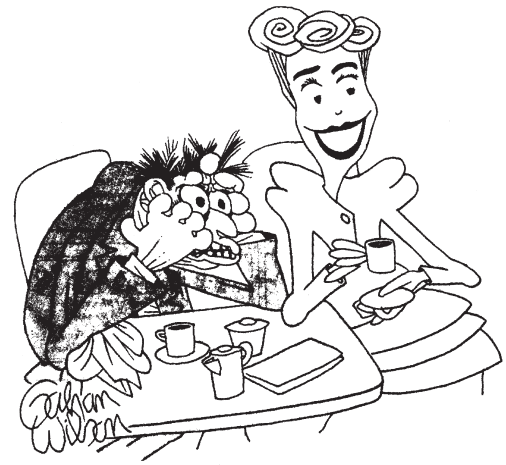
Does the existence of these good communicators mean that certain people don't need courses like the one you're taking? Hardly. Even the best communicators aren't perfect: They often suffer the frustration of being unable to get a message across effectively, and they frequently misunderstand others. Furthermore, even the most successful people you know can probably identify ways in which their relationships could profit by better communication. These facts show that communication skills are rather like athletic ability: Even the most inept of us can learn to be more effective with training and practice, and those who are talented can always become better.

More Communication Is Not Always Better

Although it's certainly true that not communicating enough is a mistake, there are also situations when *too much* communication is a mistake. Sometimes excessive communication simply is unproductive, as when we "talk a problem to death," going over the same ground again and again without making any headway. And there are times when communicating too much can actually aggravate 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 McCroskey and Wheeless put it, "More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results."[56]

There are even times when *no* communication is the best course. Any good salesperson will tell you that it's often best to stop talking and let the customer think about the product. And when two people are angry and hurt, they may say things they don't mean and will later regret. At times like these it's probably best to spend a little time cooling off, thinking about what to say and how to say it.

One key to successful communication, then, is to share an *adequate* amount of information in a *skillful* manner. Teaching you how to decide what information is adequate and what constitutes skillful behavior is one major goal of this book.



"I'm so glad we had this little talk, Earl!"

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ETHICAL CHALLENGE

TO COMMUNICATE OR NOT TO COMMUNICATE?

The explanations on pages 24–27 make it clear that communication is not a panacea. Explaining yourself and understanding others will not solve all problems; in fact, sometimes more communication leads to more problems. Think of an occasion (real or hypothetical) where more interaction would make matters worse. Imagine that the other person (or people) involved in this situation is (are) urging you to keep the channels of communication open. You know that if you do communicate more the situation will deteriorate, yet you don't want to appear uncooperative. What should you do?

SUMMARY

This chapter began by defining *communication* as it will be examined in *Understanding Human Communication:* the process of human beings responding to the symbolic behavior of other persons.

It introduced four communication contexts that will be covered in the rest of the book: intrapersonal, dyadic, small group, and public. The chapter also identified several types of needs that communication satisfies: physical, identity, social, and practical.

A linear and a transactional communication model were developed, demonstrating the superiority of the transactional model in representing the process-oriented nature of human interaction.

The chapter went on to explore the difference between effective and ineffective exchanges by discussing communication competence, showing that there is no single correct way to behave and that competence is situational, relational in nature, and it can be learned. Competent communicators were described as being able to choose and perform appropriately from a wide range of behaviors, as being cognitively complex self-monitors who can take the perspective of others and who have commitment to important relationships.

After spending most of the chapter talking about what communication is, the chapter concluded by discussing what it is not by refuting several common misconceptions. It demonstrated that communication doesn't always require complete understanding and that it is not always a good thing that will solve every problem. It showed that more communication is not always better; that meanings are in people, not in words; and that no single person or event causes another' reactions; and that communication is neither simple nor easy.

KEY TERMS

channel *12*
communication *4*
communication competence *18*
coordination *25*
decode *12*
dyad *7*
dyadic communication *7*
encode *12*
environment *13*
feedback *16*
interpersonal communication *7*
intrapersonal communication *6*
linear communication model *12*
mass communication *8*
mediated communication *12*
noise *12*
public communication *8*
receiver *12*
sender *12*
small group communication *8*
symbol *6*
transactional communication model *15*

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ACTIVITIES

1. **Analyzing Your Communication Behavior** Prove for yourself that communication is both frequent and important by observing your interactions for a one-day period. Record every occasion in which you are involved in some sort of communication as it is defined on pages 4–6. Based on your findings, answer the following questions:
   1. What percentage of your waking day is involved in communication?
   2. What percentage of time do you spend communicating in the following contexts: intrapersonal, dyadic, small group, and public?
   3. What percentage of your communication is devoted to satisfying each of the following types of needs: physical, identity, social, and practical? (Note that you might try to satisfy more than one type at a time.)

   Based on your analysis, describe five to ten ways you would like to communicate more effectively. For each item on your list of goals, describe who is involved (e.g., "my boss," "people I meet at parties") and how you would like to communicate differently (e.g., "act less defensively when criticized," "speak up more instead of waiting for them to approach me"). Use this list to focus your studies as you read the remainder of this book.
2. **Choosing the Most Effective Communication Channel** Decide which communication channel would be most effective in each of the following situations. Be prepared to explain your answer.
   1. In class, an instructor criticizes you for copying work from other sources when the work really was your own. You are furious, and you don't intend to accept the attack without responding. Which approach(es) would be best for you to use?
      a. Send your instructor an e-mail or write a letter explaining your objections.
      b. Telephone your instructor and explain your position.
      c. Schedule a personal meeting with your instructor.
   2. You want to see whether the members of your extended family are able to view the photos you've posted on your family Web site. How can you find out how easily they can access the Web site?
      a. Demonstrate the Web site at an upcoming family get-together.
      b. Send them a link to the Web site as part of an e-mail.
      c. Phone family members and ask them about their ability to access Web sites.
   3. You want to be sure the members of your office team are able to use the new voice mail system. Should you
      a. Send each employee an instruction manual for the system?
      b. Ask employees to send you e-mails or memos with any questions about the system?
      c. Conduct one or more training sessions where employees can try out the system and you can clear up any questions?
   4. You've just been given two free tickets to tomorrow night's concert. How can you best find out whether your friend can go with you?
      a. Send her an e-mail and ask for a quick reply.
      b. Leave a message on your friend's answering machine asking her to phone you back.
      c. Send an instant message via your computer.
3. **Increasing Your Communicative Competence** Prove for yourself that communication competence can be increased by following these steps.
   1. Identify a situation in which you are dissatisfied with your present communication skill.
   2. Identify at least three distinct, potentially successful approaches you might take in this situation that are different from the one you have taken in the past. If you are at a loss for alternatives, consider how other people you have observed (both real and fictional characters) have handled similar situations.
   3. From these three alternatives, choose the one you think would work best for you.
   4. Consider how you could become more skillful at performing your chosen approach. For example, you might rehearse it alone or with friends, or you might gain pointers from watching others.

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5. Consider how to get feedback on how well you perform your new approach. For instance, you might ask friends to watch you. In some cases, you might even be able to ask the people involved how you did.

This systematic approach to increasing your communicative competence isn't the only way to change, but it is one way to take the initiative in communicating more effectively.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about communication fundamentals, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Coupland, Nikolas, Howard Giles, and John M. Wiemann, eds. *Miscommunication and Problematic Talk.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991.

This collection of readings explores the many ways in which communication can be unsuccessful. Chapters focus on communication problems involving gender, age, physical disabilities, and culture. Other selections look at communication problems in different settings, such as medical, legal, and organizational.

Heath, Robert L., and Jennings Bryant. *Human Communication Theory and Research,* 2nd ed. Mawah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000.

Separate chapters describe the body of research and theorizing on communication competence and new communication technologies.

Stiebel, David. *When Talking Makes Things Worse! Resolving Problems When Communication Fails.* Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1997.

The author offers many examples from his experience as advisor to Fortune 500 companies, showing how even clear communication can create problems instead of solving them. Stiebel goes on to offer guidelines for deciding when talking will only make matters worse.

Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate nonverbal communication, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Communication as a Defining Human Characteristic

The Wild Child (1969). Not rated. French with subtitles.

The story of a boy who grew up alone in the French woods, as a wild animal might, after being abandoned in early childhood. The film's director, Francois Truffaut, cast himself as the doctor who works with the boy to give him a sense of human identity—a self-concept—and the ability to communicate. Based closely on the true case discussed on page 10.

The Importance of Communication

Cast Away (2000). Rated PG.

Chuck Noland (Tom Hanks) is a hard-driving executive who is the only survivor of a plane crash. Stranded for what may be the rest of his life on an otherwise uninhabited Pacific island, he creates a "companion" by drawing a face on a volleyball and naming him Wilson (based on the name of the sporting goods company that made the volleyball). Even though Chuck is hungry, thirsty, sunbaked, and in physical pain, he retains his will to go on because he keeps talking and "interacting" to meet his communication needs.

This story illustrates how our physical, identity, and social needs are met through communication—and for Chuck, communicating with something was better than communicating with no one. It also may have saved his life.

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Communication as a Transactional Process

Parenthood (1989). Rated PG-13.

This serious, hilarious, poignant, chaotic film looks into the lives of a four-generation family, the mood of which is captured perfectly by the grandmother, who characterizes it as a roller-coaster ride—full of exhilarating highs and gut-wrenching plunges.

We see how the life of each character is affected by the actions of the others. By the end of the film it is clear that each person's communication is both the cause and the effect of interactions with others—that communication is truly something we do *with* others, not *to* them.

Misconceptions About Communication

When a Man Loves a Woman (1994). Rated R.

To outsiders, Alice (Meg Ryan) and Michael Green (Andy Garcia) seem to have an ideal relationship. But we soon discover that Alice has hidden her alcoholism from everyone, even her husband. Her secret emerges only after her addiction threatens their young daughter.

Alice checks into a rehabilitation program where she learns about the importance of dealing with issues she has been drowning in alcohol. Alice's new understanding and her honest disclosure threaten her relationship with Michael, who, we discover, has unintentionally supported Alice's habit in order to maintain a facade of normality.

The more Alice and Michael talk, the worse things get between them. After weeks of expressing hurt and anger, they decide to separate. By the film's end, however, Michael acknowledges that they need different, not more, communication.

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AFTER STUDYING THE MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER . . .

You should understand:

1. How common perceptual tendencies and situational factors influence perception.
2. The influence of culture on perception and the self-concept.
3. The importance of empathy in communication.
4. The communicative influences that shape the self-concept.
5. How self-fulfilling prophecies influence behavior.
6. How the process of identity management can result in presentation of multiple selves.
7. The reasons for and the ethical dimensions of identity management.

You should be able to:

1. Identify how the perceptual tendencies in this chapter have led you to develop distorted perceptions of yourself and others.
2. Use perception checking and empathy to be more accurate in your perceptions of others' behavior.
3. Identify the ways you influence the self-concepts of others and the ways significant others influence your self-concept.
4. Identify the communication-related self-fulfilling prophecies that you have imposed on yourself, that others have imposed on you, and that you have imposed on others.
5. Describe the various identities you attempt to create and the ethical merit of your identity management strategies.

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