CHAPTER

1 Interpersonal Process

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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- Practical Needs

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- A Model of Communication
- Insights from the Transactional Communication Model
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- Personal and Impersonal Communication: A Matter of Balance

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- AT WORK: COMMUNICATION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT
- FOCUS ON RESEARCH: MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH DAILY CONVERSATIONS
- FOCUS ON RESEARCH: HOW TO (NOT) ANTAGONIZE YOUR PROFESSOR: ADAPTING E-MESSAGES
- DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION: EXCESSIVE SELF-MONITORING DISCOURAGES INTIMACY

After studying the material in this chapter . . .

You should understand:

1. The needs that effective communication can satisfy.
2. Four insights from the communication model.
3. Five key principles of communication.
4. Four misconceptions about communication.
5. Quantitative and qualitative definitions of interpersonal communication.
6. The characteristics of competent communication.

You should be able to:

1. Identify examples of the physical, identity, social, and practical needs you attempt to satisfy by communicating.
2. Demonstrate how the communication model applies to your interpersonal communication.
3. Describe the degrees to which your communication is qualitatively impersonal and interpersonal, and describe the consequences of this combination.
4. Identify situations in which you communicate competently and those in which your competence is less than satisfactory.

Everyone communicates. Students and professors, parents and children, employers and employees, friends, strangers, and enemies—all communicate. We have been communicating with others from earliest childhood and will almost certainly keep doing so until we die.

Why study an activity you've done your entire life? There are at least three reasons (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). First, studying interpersonal communication will give you a new look at a familiar topic. For instance, in a few pages you will find that some people can go years—even a lifetime—without communicating in a truly interpersonal manner. In this sense, exploring human communication is rather like studying anatomy or botany—everyday objects and processes take on new meaning.

A second reason for studying the subject has to do with the staggering amount of time we spend communicating. For example, one survey (Nellermoe et al., 1999) revealed that business professionals spend 80 percent of their business day communicating with colleagues and clients. Online communication is just as pervasive as the face-to-face variety: One study showed that the majority of Internet users rely on e-mail (IT Facts, 2008), with most communicating online daily, and Twitter users satisfy their need for an informal sense of camaraderie by tweeting (Chen, 2011). Among teens, almost two-thirds have posted content online: creating personal websites, writing blogs, and posting online videos (Lenhart et al., 2007; Mesch & Talmud, 2010).

There is a third, more compelling reason for studying interpersonal communication. To put it bluntly, all of us could learn to communicate more effectively. In a nationwide survey, "lack of effective communication" was identified as the cause of relational breakups—including marriages—more often than any other reason, including money, relatives or in-laws, sexual problems, previous relationships, or children (National Communication Association, 1999). Ineffective communication is also a problem in the workplace. A group of senior executives cited lack of interpersonal skills as one of the top three skill deficits in today's workforce (Marchant, 1999). Poor communication can be physically dangerous: One study found that communication errors caused twice as many hospital admissions problems as practitioners' inadequate skills (Strachan, 2004), and another found that poor professional–patient communication was the primary

problem in helping patients manage their own health care (Moffat et al., 2007).

If you pause now and make a mental list of communication problems you have encountered, you'll probably see that no matter how successful your relationships are 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 some of the people who matter most to you.

Why We Communicate

Research demonstrating the importance of communication has been around longer than you might think. Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220 to 1250, was called *stupor mundi*—"wonder of the world"—by his admiring subjects. Along with his administrative and military talents, Frederick was a leading scientist of his time. A medieval historian described one of his dramatic, inhumane experiments:

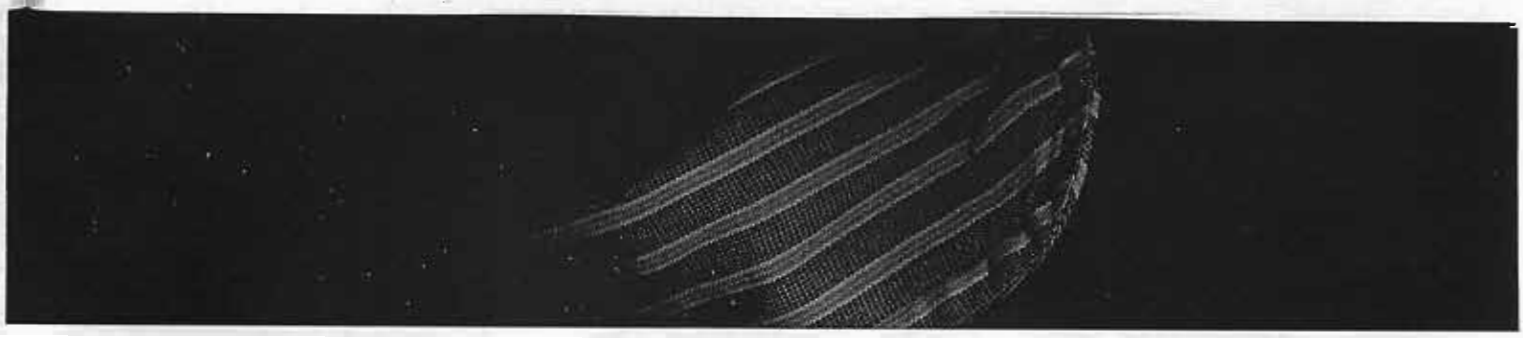
> He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had 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. (Ross & McLaughlin, 1949, p. 366)

Fortunately, contemporary researchers have found less barbaric ways to illustrate the importance of communication. In one study of isolation, five participants were paid to remain alone in a locked room. One lasted for 8 days. Three held out for 2 days, one commenting "Never again." The fifth participant lasted only 2 hours (Schachter, 1959).

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 51 days, summarized the feelings common to most loners in a post-voyage interview:

> 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. (Jackson, 1978)

You might claim that solitude would be a welcome relief from the irritations of everyday life. It's true that all of us need time by ourselves, 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 people. We all need to communicate.



PHYSICAL NEEDS

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects physical health. Recent studies confirm that people who process a negative experience by talking about it report improved life satisfaction, as well as enhanced mental and physical health, relative to those who think privately about it (Francis, 2003; Sousa, 2002). A study conducted with police officers found that being able to talk easily with colleagues and supervisors about work-related trauma was related to greater physical and mental health (Stephens & Long, 2000). A study of over 3,500 people ages 24–96 revealed that the more social contact we have, the higher the level of mental function (Ybarra et al., 2008). As little as 10 minutes of talking, face to face or by phone, improves memory and boosts intellectual function.

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 6 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. (McCain, 1999, p. 12)

Communication isn't just a necessity for prisoners of war. Evidence gathered by a host of medical researchers and social scientists (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2010; Cole et al., 2007; Fitzpatrick & Vangelisti, 2001; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Mendes de Leon, 2005; Parker-Pope, 2010; Uchino, 2004) shows that satisfying relationships can literally be a matter of life and death for people who lead normal lives. For example,

- A meta-analysis of nearly 150 studies and over 300,000 participants found that socially connected people—those with strong networks of family and friends—live an average of 3.7 years longer than those who are socially isolated.
- People with strong relationships have significantly lower risks of coronary disease, regardless of whether they smoke, drink alcoholic beverages, or exercise regularly.
- Divorced, separated, and widowed people are five to ten times more likely to need mental hospitalization than their married counterparts. Happily married people also have lower incidences of pneumonia, surgery, and cancer than single people. (It's important to note that the *quality* of the relationship is more important than the institution of marriage in these studies.)

- 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.
- College students in committed relationships experience fewer mental health problems than those not in committed relationships.

Research like this demonstrates the importance of meaningful personal relationships, and it explains the conclusion of social scientists that communication is essential. Not everyone needs the same amount of contact, and the quality of communication is almost certainly as important as the quantity. Nonetheless, the point remains: Personal communication is essential for our well-being. To paraphrase a popular song, "People who need people" aren't "the luckiest people in the world": They're the *only* people!

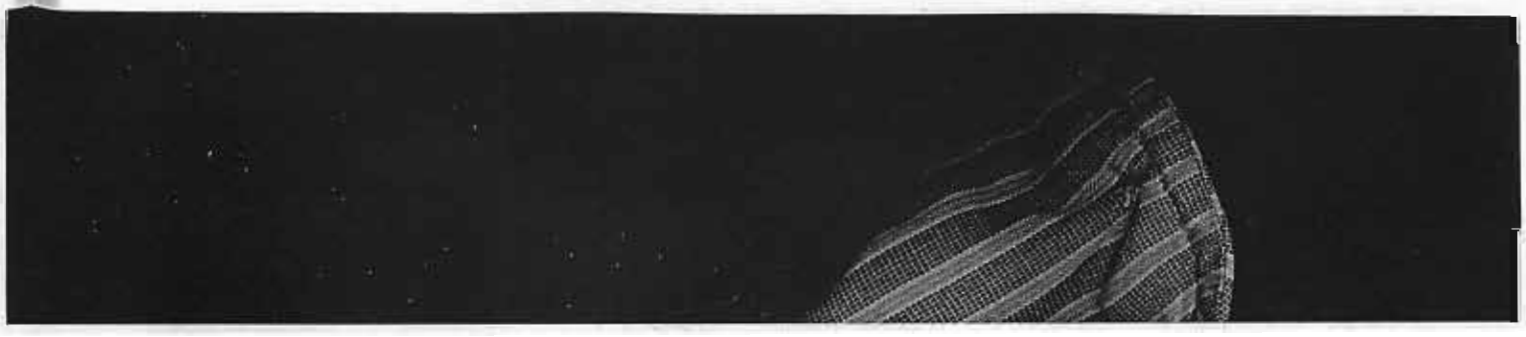
IDENTITY NEEDS

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It is the way—indeed, the *major* way—we learn who we are (Fogel et al., 2002; Harwood, 2005). As you'll read in Chapter 3, 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. Consider 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. He could not speak, and he showed no behaviors one would expect in a social human. More significant than this absence of social skills was his lack of any identity as a human being. As author Roger Shattuck (1980, p. 37) 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 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 communication plays in shaping identity. In 1970, authorities discovered a 12-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 (Rymer, 1993).

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 way others define us. As Chapter 3 explains, the messages we receive in early childhood are the strongest identity shapers, but the influence of others continues throughout life.



MEDIA CLIP COMING IN FOR A LANDING: ***UP IN THE AIR***

Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) is a corporate downsizing consultant. He's hired by companies to fly into town and do the grim work of firing their employees. Bingham is good at what he does, and he does it a lot, living out of a suitcase as he jets from city to city. Although he has an apartment in Omaha, Bingham appears to have no real home. Or family. Or friends.

Ironically, Bingham's job is threatened when a new colleague, Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick), suggests that firings could be accomplished more efficiently online. Bingham decides to prove her wrong, demanding that she accompany him on some in-person dismissals so she can see how heartless computer firings would be. Along the way, he begins to realize how heartless his own life has become. He slowly develops a friendship with Natalie, a romance with a fellow consultant, and a renewed relationship with sisters he had ignored for years.

By the film's end, it's clear that Bingham discovers that a life without meaningful interpersonal connections is a life that's not worth living—not even for all the frequent flyer miles in the world.

SOCIAL NEEDS

Besides helping define who we are, some social scientists have argued that communication is the principal way relationships are created (Duck & Pittman, 1994; Hubbard et al., 2009). For example, Julie Yingling (1994) asserts that children "talk friendships into existence." The same can be said for adult relationships: It's impossible to imagine how they could exist without communication, which satisfies a variety of needs such as giving and receiving affection, having fun, helping others and being helped, and giving us a sense of self-worth (Rubin et al., 1988). Because relationships with others are so vital, some theorists have gone so far as to argue that communication is the primary goal of human existence. Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (1990) calls the drive for meeting social needs "the human career."

There's a strong link between the quality of communication and the success of relationships. For example, children who grow up in strong conversation-oriented families report having more satisfying same-sex friendships and romantic relationships when they become adults (Koesten, 2004). Women in one study reported that "socializing" contributed more to a satisfying life than virtually any other activity, including relaxing, shopping, eating, exercise, television, or prayer (Kahneman et al., 2004).

Despite knowing that communication is vital to social satisfaction, 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 (Rochmis, 2000). Research also shows that the number of friendships is in decline. One widely recognized survey reported that in 1985, Americans had an average of 2.94 close friends. Twenty years later, that number had dropped to 2.08. It's worth noting that educated Americans reported having larger and more diverse networks. In other words, a higher education can enhance your relational life as well as your intellect.

PRACTICAL NEEDS

We shouldn't overlook the everyday, important functions communication serves. Communication is the tool that lets us tell the hairstylist 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 essential ingredient for success in virtually every career. (See the At Work box on this page.) On-the-job communication skills can even make the difference between life and death for doctors, nurses, and other medical practitioners. Researchers discovered that "poor communication" was the root of over 60 percent of reported medical errors—including death, serious physical injury, and psychological trauma (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare, 2008). Studies also show a significant difference between the communication skills of physicians who had no malpractice claims against them and doctors with previous claims (Rodriguez et al., 2008).

Communication is just as important outside of work. For example, married couples who are effective communicators report happier relationships than less skillful husbands and wives (Kirchler, 1988; Ridley et al., 2001)—a finding that has been supported across cultures (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007). In school, grade-point averages of college students are related positively to their communication competence (Hawken et al. 1991; Rubin & Graham, 1988); and school adjustment, dropout rate, and overall school achievement are highly related to students' having strong, supportive relationships (Buchanan & Bowen, 2008; Heard, 2007; Rosenfeld & Richman, 1999). And in medical settings, the outcomes of our interactions with a physician depend on the ability of both the doctor *and* patient to communicate effectively (Street, 2003).

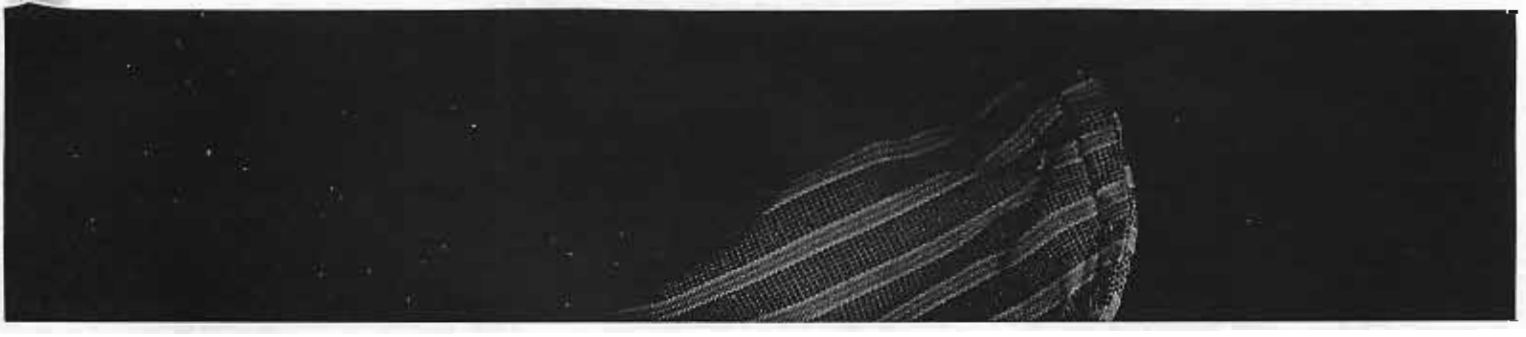
AT WORK

Communication and Career Advancement

No matter what the field, research confirms what experienced workers already know—that communication skills are crucial in finding and succeeding in a job. The abilities to speak and listen effectively have been identified as the most important factors in helping graduating college students gain employment and advance in their careers: more important than technical competence, work experience, and academic background (Winsor et al., 1997). The National Association of Colleges and Employers identified "verbal communication skills" as the most important quality employers seek in job candidates (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2010). "Employers consistently place communication skills at the top of the list of key skills," says Marilyn Mackes, NACE executive director.

Once you're hired, the need for communication skills is important in virtually every career. Engineers spend the bulk of their working lives speaking and listening, mostly in one-on-one and small-group settings (Darling & Dannels, 2003). Accounting professionals spend 80 percent of their time on the job communicating with others, individually and in groups (Nellermoe et al., 1999). Oral and written communication skills are also vital in the computer industry, according to Silicon Valley employers (Stevens, 2005). Writing in *The Scientist*, a commentator echoed this sentiment: "If I give any advice, it is that you can never do enough training around your overall communication skills" (Richman, 2002).

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1968) suggests that human needs fall into five categories, each of which must be satisfied before we concern ourselves with the next one. As you read about each need, think about the ways in which communication is often necessary to satisfy it. The most basic



needs are *physical:* sufficient air, water, food, and rest, and the ability to reproduce as a species. The second category of Maslow's needs involves *safety:* protection from threats to our well-being. Beyond physical and safety concerns are the *social* needs we have already mentioned. Next, Maslow suggests that each of us has the need for *self-esteem:* the desire to believe that we are worthwhile, valuable people. The final category of needs involves *self-actualization:* the desire to develop our potential to the maximum, to become the best person we can be.

The Communication Process

So far, we have talked about communication as if its meaning were perfectly clear. In fact, scholars have debated the definition of communication for years (Littlejohn, 2008). Despite their many disagreements, most would concur that at its essence, **communication** is about using messages to generate meanings (Korn et al., 2000). Notice how this basic definition holds true across a variety of contexts—public speaking, small groups, mass media, etc. Our goal in this section is to explain how messages and meanings are created in interpersonal communication, and to describe the many factors involved in this complex process.

A MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." That's what scientists had in mind when they began creating models of the communication process in the 1950s. These early models were simplistic and usually better suited for explaining mass communication than the interpersonal variety. They characterized communication as a one-way, linear event—something that a sender "does" by encoding a message and delivering it to a passive receiver who decodes it. This one-way process resembles an archer (the sender) shooting an arrow (the message) at a target (the receiver). Even in interpersonal settings, this linear approach sometimes makes sense. If you labor over a letter or e-mail to get the tone just right before sending it, your message is primarily a one-way effort.

Later models represented communication more like a tennis game, with people sending messages to receivers who responded with verbal or nonverbal **feedback** that indicates a response to the previous message. A back-and-forth chain of text messages seems to fit this description pretty well.

Over time, though, communication theorists have developed increasingly sophisticated **transactional communication models** in an attempt to depict all the factors that affect human interaction. No model can completely represent the process of communication, any more than a map can capture everything about the neighborhood where you live. Still, the model in Figure 1.1 provides a starting point for explaining the insights and principles discussed in the next section.

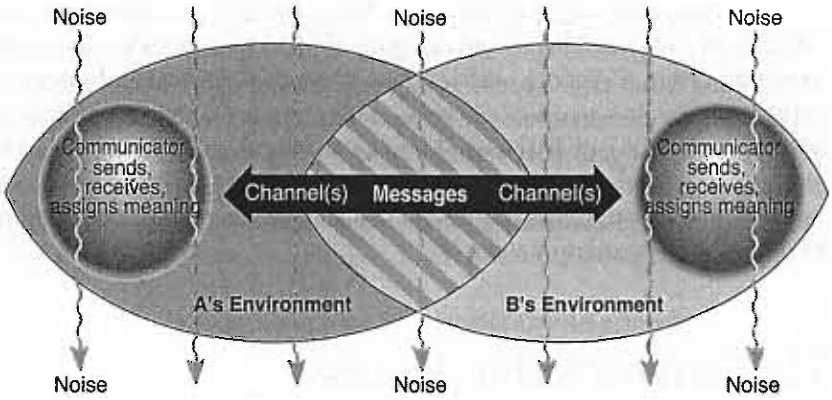


FIGURE 1.1 Communication Model

INSIGHTS FROM THE TRANSACTIONAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

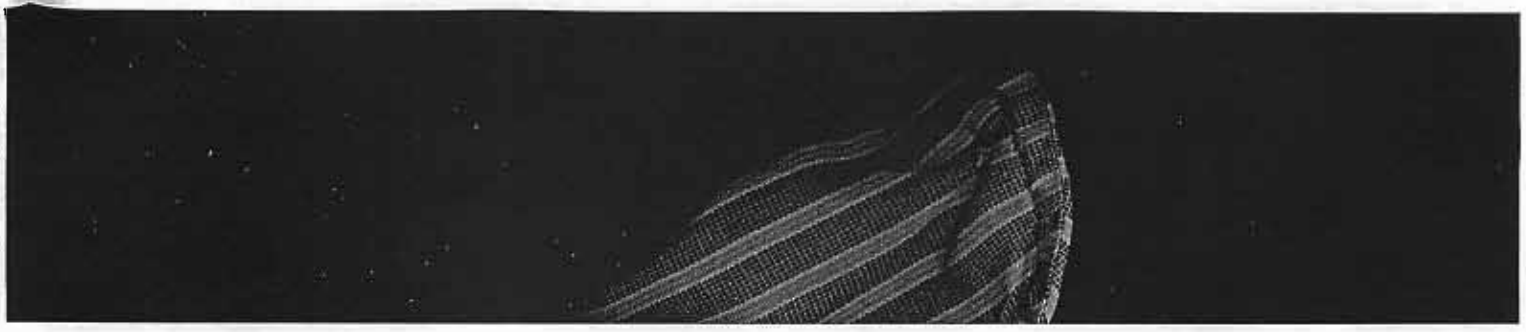
The model in Figure 1.1 reflects a number of important characteristics of transactional communication. As you read on, note how the following insights help explain the richness of this process.

Sending and Receiving Are Usually Simultaneous Some forms of interpersonal communication, such as e-mail, voice messages, or "snail mail" letters, aren't simultaneous: There's a delay between when they are sent and received (Chapter 2 will describe them as *asynchronous*). But in face-to-face interaction, it's hard to distinguish sender and receiver. Consider a few examples:

- A teacher explaining a difficult concept to a student after class
- A parent lecturing a teenager about the family's curfew rules
- A salesperson giving a customer information about a product

The natural impulse is to identify the teacher, parent, and salesperson as senders, while the student, teenager, and customer are receivers. Now imagine a confused look on the student's face; the teenager interrupting defensively; the customer blankly staring into the distance. It's easy to see that these verbal and nonverbal responses are messages being "sent," even while the other person is talking. Because it's often impossible to distinguish sender from receiver, our communication model replaces these roles with the more accurate term *communicator*. This term reflects the fact that—at least in face-to-face situations—people are simultaneously senders and receivers who exchange multiple messages.

Meanings Exist in and among People Messages, whether they are verbal or nonverbal, don't have meanings in themselves. Rather, meanings reside in



the people who express and interpret them. Imagine that a friend says, "I'm sorry," after showing up several hours late to a date. There are several possible "meanings" that this expression might have: a genuine apology, an insincere statement designed to defuse your anger, or even a sarcastic jibe. It's easy to imagine that your friend might mean one thing and you might have a different interpretation of it. The possibility of multiple interpretations means that it is often necessary to negotiate a shared meaning in order for satisfying communication to occur.

Environment and Noise Affect Communication Problems often arise because communicators occupy different **environments** (sometimes called *contexts*): fields of experience that help them make sense of 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. You can appreciate the influence of environments by thinking about your beliefs about an important topic like work, marriage, or government policies. Then imagine how your beliefs might be quite different if your personal history were different.

Notice how the model in Figure 1.1 shows that the environments of A and B overlap. This intersecting area represents the background that the communicators have in common. If this overlap didn't exist, communication would be difficult, if not impossible.

While similar environments often facilitate communication, different backgrounds can make effective communication more challenging. Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments, and to challenges:

- 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 is young and inexperienced.
- A might be passionately concerned with the subject and B indifferent to it.

Another factor in the environment that makes communication difficult is what scientists call **noise**: anything that interferes with the transmission and reception of a message. Three types of noise can disrupt communication. *External noise* includes those factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, loud music in a bar or a jackhammer grinding in the street might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person. *Physiological noise* involves biological factors in the receiver that interfere with accurate reception: hearing loss, illness, and so on. *Psychological noise* refers to cognitive factors that make communication less effective. For instance, a woman who hears the word *gal* may become so irritated that she has trouble listening objectively to the rest of a speaker's message.

Channels Make a Difference Communication scholars use the term **channel** to describe the medium through which messages are exchanged. Along with face-to-face interaction, we have the option of using mediated channels such as phones, e-mail, and instant messages. The communication channel being used can affect the way a receiver responds to a message. For example, a typewritten love letter probably won't have the same effect as a handwritten expression of affection, and being fired from a job in person would feel different than getting the bad news in an e-mail.

Most people intuitively recognize that the selection of a channel depends in part on the kind of message they're sending. In one survey, Patrick O'Sullivan (2000) asked students to identify which channel they would find best for delivering a variety of messages. Most respondents said they would have little trouble sending positive messages face to face, but mediated channels had more appeal for sending negative messages (see also Feaster, 2010). Of course, the easiest channel for a message-sender to use might not be what's best for the message recipient. One survey of 1,000 cell phone users found that 45 percent had used their mobile device to end a relationship, usually by text (Mychalcewycz, 2009). Obviously, delivering bad news this way runs the risk of wounding and infuriating the person being dumped ("She didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face"). You'll read much more about social media in Chapter 2.

COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

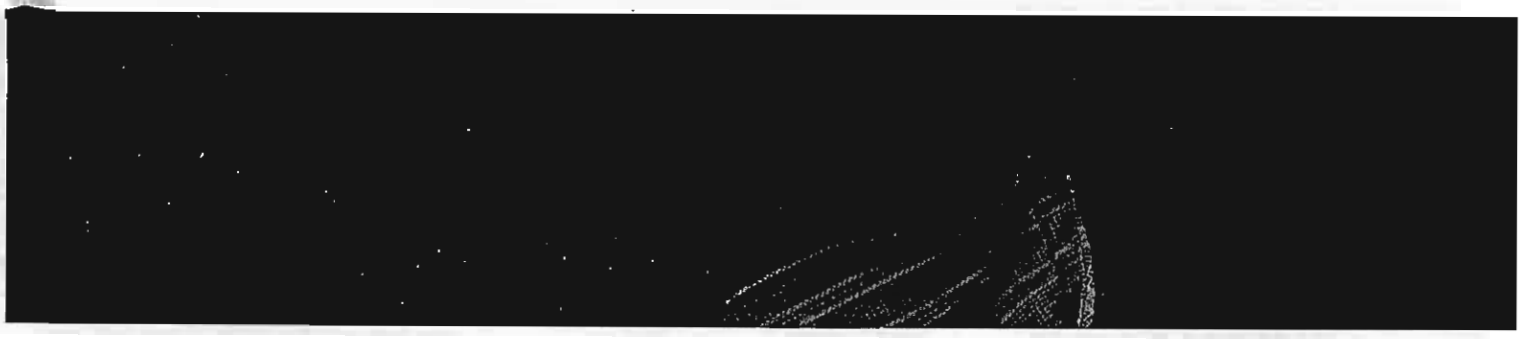
In addition to the insights offered by the communication model, there are other principles that guide our understanding of communication.

Communication Is Transactional By **transactional**, we mean that communication is a dynamic process that the participants create through their interaction with one another.

Perhaps the most important consequence of communication's transactional nature is *the mutual influence that occurs when we interact.* To put it simply, communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them. In this sense, communication is rather like dancing—at least the kind of dancing we do with partners.

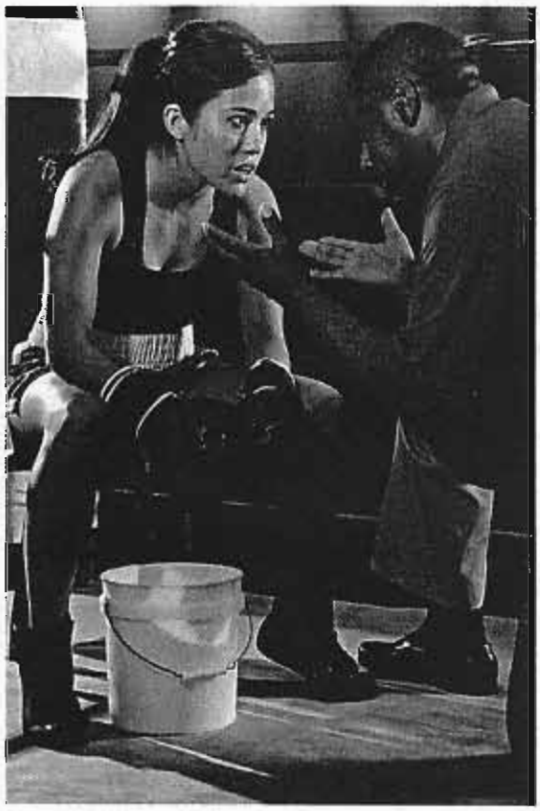
Like dancing, communication *depends on the behavior of a partner.* A great dancer who doesn't consider and adapt to the skill level of his or her partner can make both of them look bad. In communication and dancing, even two talented partners don't guarantee success. When two skilled dancers perform 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 because of its cooperative, transactional nature. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners.



Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) captures the transactional 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" (p. 158).

Communication Has a Content Dimension and a Relational Dimension Virtually all exchanges have content and relational dimensions. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: "Please pass the salt," "Not now, I'm tired," "You forgot to buy a quart of milk." In addition to this sort of obvious content, all messages also have a **relational dimension** (Dillard et al., 1999; Watzlawick et al., 1967) 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. For instance, consider how many different relational messages you could communicate by simply saying "Thanks a lot" in different ways. You can appreciate the importance of communication's relational dimension by looking at the photo on this page. This image says as much about the relationship between boxer and trainer as it does about whatever they are discussing.

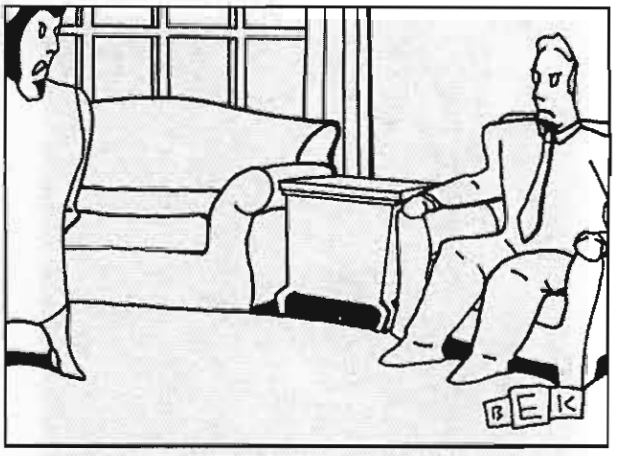


Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you may not care how the directory assistance operator feels about you as long as you get the phone number you're seeking. In a qualitative sense, however, the relational dimension of a message is often more important than the content under discussion. This explains why disputes over apparently trivial subjects become so important. In such cases we're not really arguing over whose turn it is to take out the trash or whether to play tennis or swim. Instead, we're disputing the nature of the relationship. Who's in control? How important are we to each other? Chapter 9 explores several key relational issues in detail.

Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional Some communication is clearly deliberate: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. Some scholars (e.g., Motley, 1990) argue that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. However, others (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Buck & VanLear, 2002) suggest 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.

Even the seeming absence of a behavior has communicative value. Recall the times when you sent an e-mail or left a voice mail message and received no reply. You probably assigned some meaning to the nonresponse. Was the other person angry? Indifferent? Too busy to reply? Whether or not your hunch was correct, the point remains: All behavior has communicative value. "Nothing" never happens.

In *Interplay* we look at the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior. This book takes the position that whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, show emotion 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.



"Let's stop this before we both say a lot of things we mean."

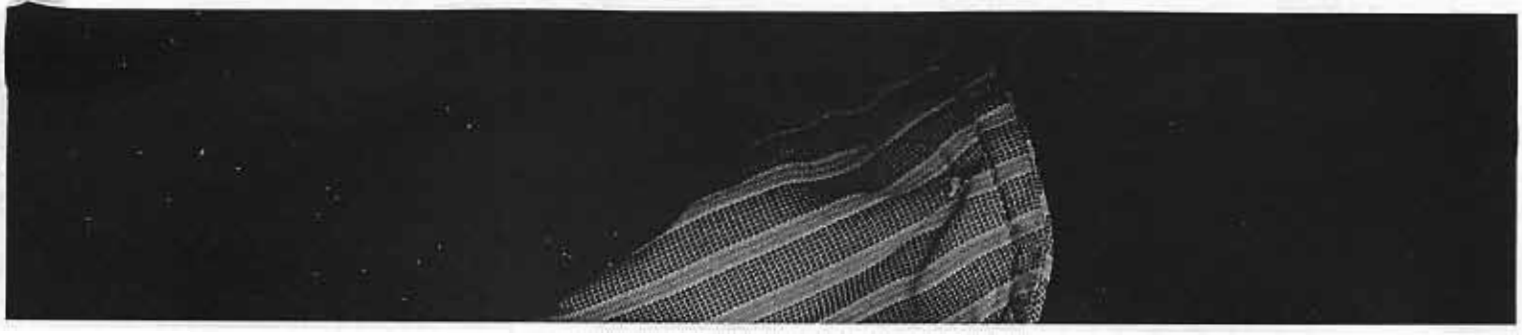
Communication Is Irreversible We sometimes wish that we could back up in time, erasing words or acts and replacing them with better alternatives. Unfortunately, such reversal is impossible. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up another's confusion or an apology can mollify another's hurt feelings, 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.

Communication Is Unrepeatable Because communication is an ongoing process, an event cannot be repeated. The friendly smile that worked so well when meeting a stranger last week may not succeed with the person you encounter tomorrow. Even with the same person, it's impossible to re-create an event. Why? Because both you and the other person have changed. You've both lived longer. The behavior isn't original. 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 MISCONCEPTIONS

Now that we've described what communication is, we need to identify some things it is not. Avoiding these common misconceptions (adapted from McCroskey & Richmond, 1996) can save you a great deal of trouble in your personal life.

Not All Communication Seeks Understanding Most people operate on the implicit but flawed assumption that the goal of all communication is to



maximize understanding between communicators. While some understanding is necessary for us to coordinate our interaction, there are some types of communication in which understanding, as we usually conceive it, isn't the primary goal. Consider, for example,

The social rituals we enact every day. "How's it going?" you ask. "Great," the other person replies. The primary goal in exchanges like these is mutual acknowledgment of one another's existence and value (even if the person *isn't* feeling great). The unstated message is "I consider you important enough to notice." There's obviously no serious attempt to exchange information (Burnard, 2003).

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 ad. In the same way, many of our attempts at persuading others 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.

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 were 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 Chapter 3 explains in detail, we often lie or hedge our remarks precisely because we want to obscure our true thoughts and feelings.

More Communication Is Not Always Better While failure to communicate effectively can certainly cause problems, *too much* talking also can be 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 McCroskey and Wheeless (1976, p. 5) put it, "More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results." In one study, college roommates revealed that thinking and talking about conflicts can actually increase relational problems (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). Even when relationships aren't troubled, less communication may be better than more. One study found that coworkers who aren't highly dependent on one another perform better when they don't spend a great deal of time talking together (Barrick et al., 2007). There are even times when *no* interaction is the best course. When two people are angry and hurt, they may say things they don't mean and will later regret. In such cases it's probably best to spend time cooling off, thinking about what to say and how to say it. Chapter 8 will help you decide when and how to share feelings.

Communication Will Not Solve All Problems Sometimes even the best-planned, best-timed communication won't solve a problem. For example, imagine that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project you believe deserved top marks. The professor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the low 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 an expensive outfit he 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 3 for suggestions.

Effective Communication Is Not a Natural Ability Most people assume that communication is something that people can do without the need for training—rather like breathing. Although nearly everyone does manage to function passably without much formal communication training, most people operate at a level of effectiveness far below their potential. In fact, communication skills are rather like athletic ability. Even the most inept of us can learn to be more effective with training and practice, and even the most talented need to "keep in shape."

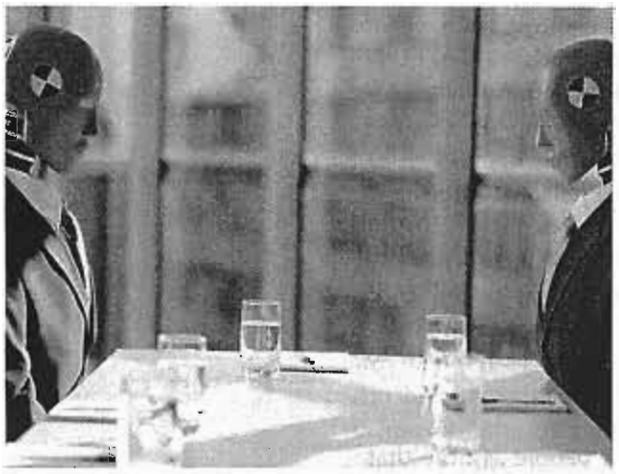
Interpersonal Communication Defined

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

QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE DEFINITIONS

Scholars have characterized interpersonal communication in two ways (Redmond, 1995). Some definitions take a **quantitative** approach that defines interpersonal communication as any interaction between two people. Social scientists call two persons 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.

Dyadic communication *is* different from the kind of interaction that occurs in larger groups (Lev-On & Chavez, 2010; Wilmot, 1995). In a group, participants can form coalitions to get support for their positions. In a dyad, though, partners must work matters out with each other. This difference explains why, when a task calls for competition, children prefer to play in



three-person groups, and if it calls for cooperation, they prefer to be in dyads (Benenson et al., 2000).

Despite the unique qualities of dyads, 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 the same as when you talk with a friend about a personal problem or share your experiences of a year in school with your family.

The impersonal nature of some two-person exchanges—the kind when you think, "I might as well have been talking to a machine"—has led many scholars to argue that quality, not quantity, is what distinguishes interpersonal communication. Using a **qualitative** approach, 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* interaction, not group, public, or mass communication.

Several features distinguish qualitatively interpersonal communication from less personal exchanges. The first is *uniqueness.* Whereas impersonal exchanges are governed by the kind of social rules we learn from parents, teachers, and etiquette books, the way we communicate in a truly personal relationship is unlike our behavior with anyone else. In one relationship you might exchange good-natured insults, while 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. Communication scholar Julia Wood (2005b) coined the term "relational culture" to describe people in close relationships who create their own unique ways of interacting.

A second characteristic of qualitatively interpersonal communication 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.

Interdependence is a third characteristic of qualitatively interpersonal relationships. Here, 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 interpersonally, 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, interdependence is a fact of life in qualitatively interpersonal relationships.

A fourth yardstick of qualitative interpersonal communication is *disclosure* of personal information. In impersonal relationships we don't reveal much about ourselves, but in many interpersonal ones communicators feel more comfortable sharing their 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!"

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 of *intrinsic rewards* that come from your communication. It doesn't matter what you talk about: Developing the relationship is what's important.

Because interpersonal communication is characterized by the qualities of uniqueness, irreplaceability, interdependence, disclosure, and intrinsic rewards, it forms a small fraction of our interaction. The majority of our communication is relatively impersonal. 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 coworkers and teachers in a polite way; but considering the number of people with whom we communicate, interpersonal relationships are by far the minority.

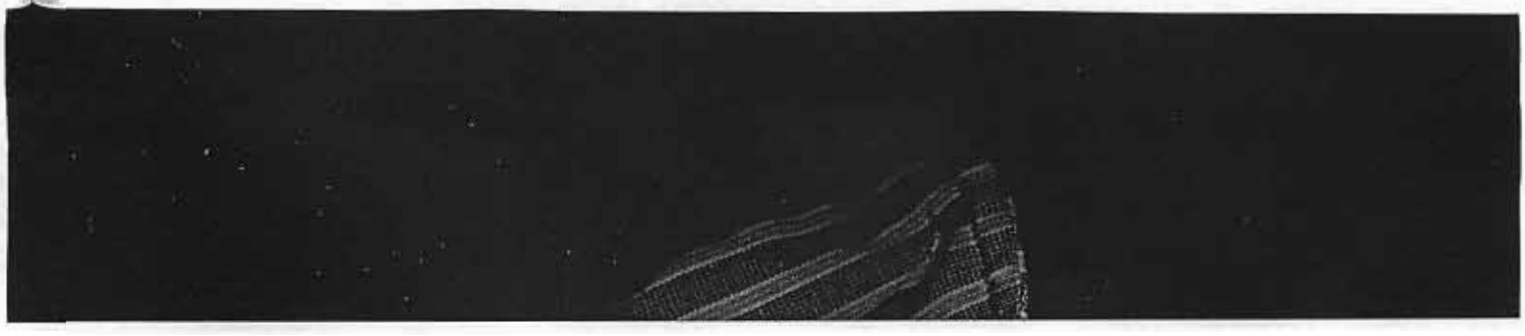
The rarity of qualitatively interpersonal communication isn't necessarily unfortunate. Most of us don't have the time or energy to create personal relationships with everyone we encounter. Even with our closest relational partners, deeply personal conversations occur infrequently. In fact, the scarcity of interpersonal communication contributes to its value (Mehl et al., 2010). Like precious and one-of-a-kind artwork, qualitatively interpersonal communication is special because it is rare.

PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL COMMUNICATION: A MATTER OF BALANCE

Now that the differences between qualitatively interpersonal and impersonal communication are spelled out, we need to ask some important questions. Is personal communication better than the impersonal variety? Is more personal communication the goal?

Most relationships aren't either personal or impersonal. Rather, they fall somewhere between these two extremes. Consider your own communication and you'll find 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 spend a few moments sharing private thoughts with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

When it comes to close relationships, there are certainly times when small talk isn't sufficient (Mehl et al., 2010). But just as there's a personal



SELF-ASSESSMENT

How Interpersonal Are Your Relationships?

Select three important relationships to assess. These might include your relationships with people at work or school, or with friends or family. For each relationship, respond to the following items:

1. To what extent is the relationship characterized by uniqueness? How much is this relationship one of a kind?

   LOW LEVEL OF UNIQUENESS 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 HIGHLY UNIQUE

2. To what extent is the relationship irreplaceable?

   VERY EASY TO REPLACE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 VERY HARD TO REPLACE

3. To what extent are you and your relationship partner interdependent; that is, to what extent does one person's actions affect the other?

   LITTLE INTERDEPENDENCE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 HIGH INTERDEPENDENCE

4. To what extent is communication in the relationship marked by high disclosure of personal information?

   LOW DISCLOSURE 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 HIGH DISCLOSURE

5. To what extent does the relationship create its own intrinsic rewards?

   REWARDS ARE EXTRINSIC 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 REWARDS ARE INTRINSIC

Based on your answers, decide how qualitatively interpersonal (or how impersonal) each of the relationships is. (If you have more 5s, 6s, and 7s in your answers, then your relationship is more interpersonal. If you have more 1s, 2s, and 3s, then the relationship is more impersonal.) How satisfied are you with your findings? What can you do to improve your level of satisfaction with these relationships?

element in many impersonal settings, there's also an impersonal side to our relationships with the people we care about most. In fact, most communication in even the closest relationships is comfortably mundane (see the Focus on Research box on page 19). Small talk is especially valuable in long-distance relationships where communication is mostly sustained online (Tong & Walther, 2011b). Being able to discuss mundane topics like daily activities and the weather helps normalize a relationship that would otherwise feel much different from one nurtured by everyday contact.

Along with small talk, there are occasions when we don't want to be personal: when we're distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. In fact,

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Maintaining Relationships through Daily Conversations

What can researchers learn from analyzing 172 hours of couples' daily conversations about mundane topics such as pets, television shows, and weekend plans? According to Jess Alberts and her colleagues, the routine talk that makes up much of everyday life is an important tool that helps couples maintain their relationships.

The research team took on the laborious task of taping, transcribing, and coding the daily interactions of 10 satisfied couples in long-term relationships. They found that more than 40 percent of the couples' conversations involved self-reports (e.g., "I had lunch today with the rep on my new account") or observations ("That clock is slow"). The researchers concluded that relational partners play important roles as "audiences for the articulation of one's experiences and thoughts." In other words, people want and expect their partners to provide a listening ear.

The couples talked about more than just themselves. For example, they discussed other people in their lives (friends, family, colleagues) and television shows (often while watching television together). Time was also spent discussing household tasks and upcoming plans. Were many of these interactions mundane and routine? Certainly. Were they unimportant? Hardly. Alberts and her colleagues concluded that these apparently mundane conversations are "necessary types of interaction for relationship maintenance that form the bedrock on which the relationship is built."

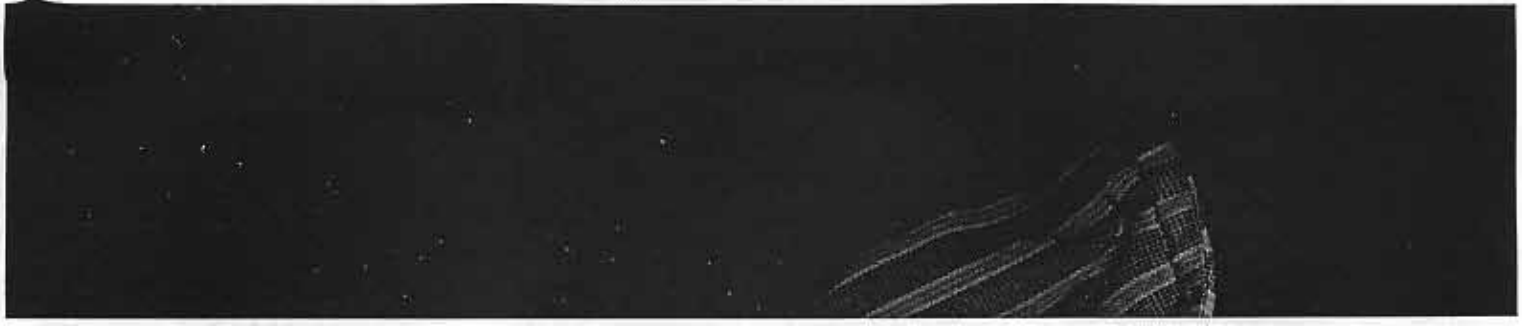
Alberts, J. K., Yoshimura, C. G., Rabby, M., & Loschiavo, R. (2005). Mapping the topography of couples' daily conversation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 22,* 299–322.

interpersonal communication is rather like rich food—it's fine in moderation, but too much can make you uncomfortable.

The blend of personal and interpersonal communication can shift in various stages of a relationship. The communication between young lovers who talk only about their feelings may change as their relationship develops. Several years later their communication has become more routine and ritualized, and the percentage of time they spend on personal, relational issues drops while the conversation about less intimate topics increases. Chapter 9 discusses how communication changes as relationships pass through various stages, and Chapter 3 describes various theories of self-disclosure. As you read this information, you will see even more clearly that while interpersonal communication can make life worth living, it isn't possible or desirable all the time.

Communication Competence

"What does it take to communicate better?" is probably the most important question to ask as you read this book. Answering it has been one of the leading challenges for communication scholars. While all the answers aren't in yet, 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 continue to debate a precise definition, most agree that competent communication is both *effective* and *appropriate* (Spitzberg, 2000). To understand these two dimensions, consider how you might handle everyday communication challenges such as declining an unwanted invitation or communicating about a friend's annoying behavior. In cases like these, *effective* communication would get the results you want. *Appropriate* communication would do so in a way that, in most cases, enhances the relationship in which it occurs (Wiemann et al., 1997). You can appreciate the importance of both appropriateness and effectiveness by imagining approaches that would satisfy one of these criteria but not the other. Effectiveness without appropriateness might achieve your goals, but leave others unhappy. Conversely, appropriateness without effectiveness might leave others content but you frustrated. With the goal of balancing effectiveness and appropriateness, the following paragraphs outline several important characteristics of communication competence.

MEDIA CLIP

EFFECTIVE BUT NOT ALWAYS APPROPRIATE: *HOUSE M.D.*

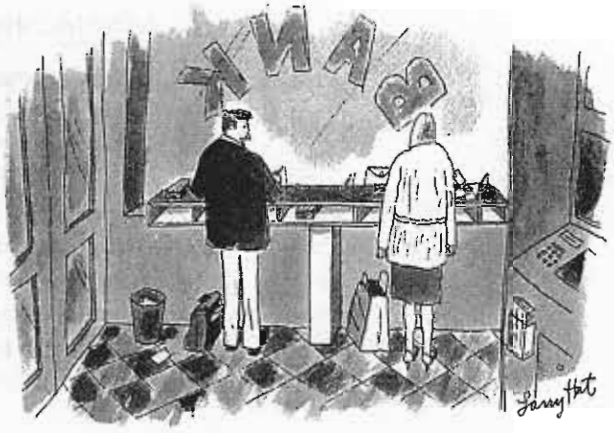
No one at Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital would deny that Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) is an excellent physician. His sharp mind and keen analytical skills help him make diagnoses that often save lives. House's colleagues marvel at his ability to solve baffling medical cases, so they seek out and heed his advice.

On the other hand, House's interpersonal skills leave something to be desired. He is typically gruff, blunt, rude, and condescending. As a result, House often alienates his supervisors, students, and even the patients he's trying to serve. In terms of communication competence, he is long on effectiveness but short on appropriateness. If House engaged in more self-monitoring and expressed more empathy, he would be a better communicator and probably have more friends. But then again, this TV show wouldn't be nearly as entertaining.

There Is No Single "Ideal" or "Effective" Way to Communicate Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, while others use humor; some are gregarious, while others are quieter; and some are more straightforward, while others hint diplomatically. Just as there are many kinds of beautiful music or art, there are many kinds of competent communication. Furthermore, a type of communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another, and what one person thinks is competent may be seen by another as incompetent (Dunleavy & Martin, 2010). The joking insults you routinely trade with one friend might offend a sensitive family member, and last Saturday night's romantic approach would probably be out of place at work on Monday morning. This means that there can be no surefire list of rules or tips that will guarantee your success as a communicator.

Flexibility is especially important when members of different cultures meet. Some communication skills seem to be universal (Ruben, 1989). Every culture has rules that

require speakers to behave appropriately, for example. But the definition of what kind of communication is appropriate in a given situation varies considerably from one culture to another (Arasaratnam, 2007; Ulrey, 2001). 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-disclosure and straight talking 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 (Kim et al., 1998; Yeh, 2010). We'll discuss the many dimensions of intercultural competence in Chapter 2.



"How much you puttin' in?"

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 (Spitzberg, 1991). It's more accurate to talk about *degrees* or *areas* of competence.

You and the people you know are probably quite competent in some areas and less so in others. For example, you might deal quite skillfully with peers, while feeling clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, wealthier or poorer, more or less attractive than yourself. In fact, your competence may vary from situation to situation. This means it's an overgeneralization to say, in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" It's more accurate to say, "I didn't handle this situation very well, but I'm better in others."

Competence Can Be Learned To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication competence (Teven et al., 2010). Some research suggests that certain personality traits predispose people toward particular competence skills (Hullman et al., 2010). For instance, those who are agreeable and conscientious by nature find it easier to be appropriate, and harder to be (and become) assertive and effective.

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 (Fortney et al., 2001). For instance, people with high communication apprehension often benefit from communication skills training (Ayres & Hopf, 1993; Dwyer, 2000). Skills training has also been shown to help communicators in a variety of professional fields (Brown et al., 2010; Hyvarinen et al., 2010; Kuntze et al., 2009). Even without systematic training, it's possible to develop communication skills through the processes of observation and trial and error. We learn from our own successes and failures, as well as from observing other models—both positive and negative. And, of course, it's our hope that you will become a more competent communicator as a result of putting the information in this book to work.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPETENT COMMUNICATION

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 Large Repertoire of Skills As we've already seen, good communicators don't use the same approach in every situation. They know that sometimes it's best to be blunt and sometimes tactful; that there is a time to speak up and a time to be quiet.

The chances of reaching your personal and relational goals increase with the number of options you have about how to communicate. For example, if you want to start a conversation with a stranger, your chances of success increase as you have more options available (Kelly & Watson, 1986). All it might take to get the conversational ball rolling is a self-introduction. In other cases, seeking assistance might work well: "I've just moved here. What kind of neighborhood is the Eastside?" A third strategy is to ask a question about some situational feature: "I've never heard this band before. Do you know anything about them?" You could also offer a sincere compliment and follow it up with a question: "Great shoes! Where did you get them?"

Many people with disabilities have learned the value of having a repertoire of options available to manage unwanted offers of help (Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2003). Some of those options include performing a task quickly, before anyone has the chance to intervene; pretending not to hear the offer; accepting a well-intentioned invitation, to avoid seeming rude or ungrateful; using humor to deflect a bid for help; declining a well-intentioned offer with thanks; and assertively refusing help from those who won't take no for an answer.

Just as a golfer has a wide range of clubs to use for various situations, a competent communicator has a large array of behaviors from which to choose.

Adaptability Having a large repertoire of possible behaviors is one ingredient of competent communication, but you have to be able to choose the *right* one for a particular situation (Hullman, 2007). Effective communication means selecting appropriate responses for each situation—and for each recipient. The Focus on Research sidebar on page 23 describes how some college students don't adapt their messages when e-mailing instructors, creating a negative impression.

Ability to Perform Skillfully Once you have chosen the appropriate way to communicate, you have to perform that behavior effectively (Burleson, 2007). In communication, as in other activities, practice is the key to skillful performance. Much of the information in *Interplay* will introduce you to new tools for communicating, and the Skill Builder activities at the end of each chapter will help you practice them.

Involvement Not surprisingly, effective communication occurs when the people care about one another and the topic at hand (Cegala et al., 1982). Rod Hart suggests that this involvement has several dimensions (adapted

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

How to (NOT) Antagonize Your Professor: Adapting E-Messages

Research shows that out-of-classroom communication (OCC) usually strengthens teacher–student bonds and improves learning. Most OCC exchanges used to take place in hallways and offices, but now they often occur online through e-mails. A research team led by Keri Stephens investigated whether the writing style of student e-messages has an impact on their effectiveness.

The researchers asked college and university instructors to evaluate overly casual e-mails from students. These less-than-formal messages included a lack of openings/closings, incorrect punctuation and grammar, and shortcuts such as using "4" instead of "for." The findings aren't surprising. They include:

- Highly casual e-mails lower instructors' appraisals of the students who sent them.
- Instructors are far less likely to comply with requests made in overly casual messages, compared with e-mails that are written more formally.
- Two violations that particularly bother instructors are e-mails not signed by the message sender and messages that include shortcuts such as "RU" instead of "are you."

Failing to adapt your message to the recipient runs the risk that your requests will backfire. This is important not only for student–instructor emails, but also in every interpersonal interaction.

Stephens, K. K., Houser, M. L., & Cowan, R. L. (2009). R U able to meat me: The impact of students' overly casual email messages to instructors. *Communication Education, 58,* 303–326.

here from Knapp & Vangelisti, 2006). It includes commitment to the other person and the relationship, concern about the message being discussed, and a desire to make the relationship clearly useful.

Empathy/Perspective Taking People have the best chance of developing an effective message when they understand and empathize with the other person's point of view (Lobchuk, 2006; Sorensen, 2009). Since others aren't always good at expressing their thoughts and feelings clearly, the ability to imagine how an issue might look from another's perspective suggests why empathy is such an important communication skill. Not only does it help you understand others, but it also provides information to develop strategies about how to best influence them. Empathy is such an important element of communicative competence that researcher Mark Redmond (1989, p. 594) flatly states that "by definition, a person cannot produce a message that is empathic that is not also communicatively competent."

Cognitive Complexity **Cognitive complexity** is the ability to construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue. 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.

Researchers have found that a large number of constructs for interpreting the behavior of others leads to greater "conversational sensitivity,"

increasing the chances of acting in ways that will produce satisfying results (Burleson & Caplan, 1998; Burleson, Hanasono, Bodie, Holmstrom, Rack, et al., 2009). Not surprisingly, research also shows a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy (Joireman, 2004). The relationship makes sense: The more ways you have to understand others and interpret their behaviors, the greater is the likelihood that you can see and communicate about the world from their perspective.

Dark Side of Communication

EXCESSIVE SELF-MONITORING DISCOURAGES INTIMACY

Although self-monitoring is generally an element of competent communication, some research suggests that paying *too much* attention to how you present yourself can have a dark side. One study revealed that high self-monitors often experience less intimacy, satisfaction, and commitment in their romantic relationships than people who aren't so strategic. On reflection, these results make sense: Communicators who are overly concerned with managing impressions often hide what they really think and feel—hardly a recipe for intimacy.

As a rule of thumb, self-monitoring is a valuable skill in less personal interactions and in the early stages of close relationships. Over time, however, romantic relationships can profit from communication that is a bit less guarded, crafted, and scrutinized.

Wright, C. N., Holloway, A., & Roloff, M. E. (2007). The dark side of self-monitoring: How high self-monitors view their romantic relationships. *Communication Reports, 20,* 101-114.

Self-Monitoring Psychologists use the term **self-monitoring** to describe the process of paying close attention to one's own behavior and using these observations to shape the way one behaves. Self-monitors are able to detach a part of their consciousness to 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."

It's no surprise that self-monitoring generally increases one's effectiveness as a communicator (Day et al., 2002; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). The President's Council of Economic Advisers maintain that greater "self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self control" will help students be more successful when they enter the job market ("Preparing the Workers of Today," 2009, p. 10). The ability to ask yourself the question "How am I doing?" and to change your behavior if the answer isn't positive

is a tremendous asset for communicators. People with poor self-monitoring skills often blunder through life, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing, without the detachment to understand why.

How does your behavior as an interpersonal communicator measure up against the standards of competence described in this chapter? Like most people, you will probably find some areas of your life that are very satisfying and others that you would like to change. As you read on in this book, realize that the information in each chapter offers advice that can help your communication become more productive and rewarding.

Although the qualities described here do play an important role in communicative competence, they can be ineffective when carried to excess (Spitzberg, 1994). As the "Dark Side" box on page 24 shows, too much self-monitoring can be a problem in close relationships. Even in less personal contexts, an excessive concern for appearance ("How do I sound?," "How am I doing?") overshadows the need to be faithful to one's true beliefs. Likewise, an excess of empathy and cognitive complexity can lead you to see all sides of an issue so well that you're incapable of acting. In other words, there is a *curvilinear relationship* among most of the elements described in these pages: Both a deficiency and an excess can lead to incompetent communication.

Summary

Communication is important for a variety of reasons. Besides satisfying practical needs, meaningful communication contributes to physical health, plays a major role in defining our identity, and forms the basis for our social relationships.

Communication is the use of messages to generate meanings. It is a complex process that can be represented in a communication model. The model presented in this chapter depicts how interpersonal communicators usually send and receive messages simultaneously. The meaning of these messages resides in the people who exchange them, not in the messages themselves. Environment and noise affect communication, as do the channels we choose for sending our messages.

A variety of principles help explain how interpersonal communication operates. Communication is transactional—that is, it's a dynamic process that people create through interaction. Messages can be intentional or unintentional, and they almost always have both a content and a relational dimension. Once expressed, messages cannot be withdrawn. Finally, communication is unrepeatable.

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 is relatively infrequent, even in many close relationships.

To understand the communication process, it is important to recognize and avoid several common misconceptions. Despite the value of self-expression, more communication is not always better. In fact, there are occasions when more communication can increase problems. Sometimes total understanding isn't as important as we might think. Even at its best, communication is not a panacea that will solve every problem. Effective communication is not a natural ability. While some people have greater aptitude at communicating, everyone can learn to interact with others more effectively.

Communication competency is the ability to be both effective and appropriate—that is, to get desired results from others in a manner that maintains the relationship on terms that are acceptable to everyone. There is no single ideal way to communicate: Flexibility and adaptability are characteristics of competent communicators, as are skill at performing behaviors, involvement with others, empathy and perspective taking, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring. The good news is, communication competency can be learned.

Key Terms

- Channel (11)
- Cognitive complexity (23)
- Communication (8)
- Communication competence (20)
- Content dimension (of a message) (12)
- Dyad (15)
- Environment (10)
- Feedback (8)
- Noise (external, physiological, and psychological) (10)
- Qualitative (interpersonal communication) (16)
- Quantitative (interpersonal communication) (15)
- Relational dimension (of a message) (12)
- Self-monitoring (24)
- Transactional communication model (8)

Activities

1. Invitation to Insight

How much time do you spend communicating? Conduct an informal study to answer this question by keeping a 2-day log of your activities. Based on your findings, answer the following questions:

a. What percentage of your waking time is spent speaking and listening to others?

b. Using the explanation on pages 15–17, describe what percentage of your entire communication is qualitatively interpersonal.
c. How satisfied are you with your findings? How would you like to change your everyday communication?

2. Critical Thinking Probe

As you read in this chapter, communication is transactional in nature: something we do *with* others and not *to* them. How does face-to-face communication differ from computer social media, such as e-mail? Are they equally transactional?

3. Invitation To Insight

How competent are you as a communicator? You can begin to answer this question by interviewing people who know you well: a family member, friend, or fellow worker, for example. Interview different people to determine if you are more competent in some relationships than others, or in some situations than others.

a. Describe the characteristics of competent communicators outlined on pages 20–25 of this chapter. Be sure your interviewee understands each of them.
b. Ask your interviewee to rate you on each of the observable qualities. (It won't be possible for others to evaluate internal characteristics, such as cognitive complexity and self-monitoring.) Be sure this evaluation reflects your communication in a variety of situations: It's likely you aren't uniformly competent—or incompetent—in all of them.
c. If your rating is not high in one or more areas, discuss with your partner how you could raise it.

4. Skill Builder

Knowing how you want to communicate isn't the same as being able to perform competently. The technique of behavior rehearsal provides a way to improve a particular communication skill before you use it in real life. Behavior rehearsal consists of four steps:

a. Define your goal. Begin by identifying the way you want to behave.
b. Break the goal into the behaviors it involves. Most goals are made up of several verbal and nonverbal parts. You may be able to identify these parts by thinking about them yourself, by observing others, by reading about them, or by asking others for advice.
c. Practice each behavior before using it in real life. You can practice a new behavior by rehearsing it alone and then with others before you put it into action. Another approach is to picture yourself behaving in new ways. This mental image can boost effectiveness.
d. Try out the behavior in real life. You can increase the odds of success if you follow two pieces of advice when trying out new communication behaviors: Work on only one subskill at a time, and start with easy situations. Don't expect yourself suddenly to behave flawlessly in the most challenging situations. Begin by practicing your new skills in situations in which you have a chance of success.