

Foundations of Interpersonal Communication



MESSAGES IN THE MEDIA

OBJECTIVES After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Explain the personal and professional benefits to be derived from the study of interpersonal communication.
2. Define *interpersonal communication*.
3. Diagram a model of communication containing source–receiver, messages, channel, noise, and context, and define each of these elements.
4. Explain the principles of interpersonal communication, and give examples of each.
5. Define and illustrate the four essential interpersonal communication competencies.

In *Community* you see a group of community college students interact in a wide variety of situations. Most of the time, their communication patterns get them into trouble—not unlike people in real life. Clearly they could use a good course in interpersonal communication. This first chapter introduces this most important form of communication.

 Listen to the **Chapter Audio** at **MyCommunicationLab**



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WHY STUDY INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Fair questions to ask at the beginning of this text and this course are “What will I get out of this?” and “Why should I study interpersonal communication?” As with any worthwhile study, we can identify two major benefits: personal/social and professional.

Personal and Social Success

Your personal success and happiness depend largely on your effectiveness as an interpersonal communicator. Your close friendships and romantic relationships are made, maintained, and sometimes destroyed largely through your interpersonal interactions. In fact, the success of your family relationships depends heavily on the interpersonal communication among members. For example, in a survey of 1,001 people over 18 years of age, 53 percent felt that a lack of effective communication was the major cause of marriage failure, significantly greater than money (38 percent) and in-law interference (14 percent) (Roper Starch, 1999).

Likewise, your social success in interacting with neighbors, acquaintances, and people you meet every day depends on your ability to engage in satisfying conversation—conversation that’s comfortable and enjoyable.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Choices and Interpersonal Communication

Throughout this book, you’ll find marginal items labeled *Interpersonal Choice Points*. These items are designed to encourage you to apply the material discussed in the text to specific interpersonal situations by first analyzing your available choices and then making a communication decision.

Professional Success

The ability to communicate interpersonally is widely recognized as crucial to professional success (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). From the initial interview at a college job fair to interning to participating in and then leading meetings, your skills at interpersonal communication will largely determine your success.

One study, for example, found that among the 23 attributes ranked as “very important” in hiring decisions, “communication and interpersonal skills” was at the top of the list, noted by 89 percent of the recruiters. This was a far higher percentage of recruiters than noted “content of the core curriculum” (34 percent) or “overall value for the money invested in the recruiting effort” (33 percent) (Alsop, 2004). Interpersonal skills play an important role in preventing workplace violence (Parker, 2004) and in reducing medical mishaps and improving doctor–patient communication (Epstein & Hundert, 2002; Smith, 2004; Sutcliffe, Lewton, & Rosenthal, 2004). In a survey of employers who were asked what colleges should place more emphasis on, 89 percent identified “the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing,” the highest of any skills listed (Hart Research Associates, 2010). The importance of interpersonal communication skills extends over the entire spectrum of professions.

As a preface to an area of study that will be enlightening, exciting, and extremely practical, examine your assumptions about interpersonal communication by taking the accompanying self-test.



VIEWPOINTS To communicate

Women often report that an essential quality—perhaps the most important quality—in a partner is one who can communicate. How important, compared to all the other factors you might take into consideration in choosing a partner, is the ability to communicate? What specific interpersonal communication skills would you consider “extremely important” in a life partner?



Can you explain why learning about interpersonal communication is beneficial to your personal and professional life?

TEST YOURSELF

What Do You Believe About Interpersonal Communication?

Respond to each of the following statements with T (true) if you believe the statement is usually true or F (false) if you believe the statement is usually false.

- ___ 1. Good communicators are born, not made.
- ___ 2. The more you communicate, the better at communicating you will be.
- ___ 3. In your interpersonal communications, a good guide to follow is to be as open, empathic, and supportive as you can be.
- ___ 4. In intercultural communication, it's best to ignore differences and communicate just as you would with members of your own culture.
- ___ 5. When there is conflict, your relationship is in trouble.

How Did You Do? As you probably figured out, all five statements are generally false. As you read this text, you'll discover not only why these beliefs are false but also the trouble you can get into when you assume they're true. For now and in brief, here are some of the reasons why each statement is (generally) false: (1) Effective

communication is learned; all of us can improve our abilities and become more effective communicators. (2) It isn't the amount of communication that matters, it's the quality. If you practice bad habits, you're more likely to grow less effective than more effective. (3) Because each interpersonal situation is unique, the type of communication appropriate in one situation may not be appropriate in another. (4) Ignoring differences will often create problems; people from different cultures may, for example, follow different rules for what is and what is not appropriate in interpersonal communication. (5) All meaningful relationships experience conflict; the trick is to manage it effectively.

What Will You Do? This is a good place to start practicing the critical-thinking skill of questioning commonly held assumptions—about communication and about yourself as a communicator. Do you hold beliefs that may limit your thinking about communication? For example, do you believe that certain kinds of communication are beyond your capabilities? Do you impose limits on how you see yourself as a communicator?

THE NATURE OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Although this entire book is in a sense a definition of interpersonal communication, a working definition is useful at the start. **Interpersonal communication** is the verbal and nonverbal interaction between two interdependent people (sometimes more). This relatively simple definition implies a variety of characteristics.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Interdependent Individuals

Interpersonal communication is the communication that takes place between people who are in some way “connected.” Interpersonal communication would thus include what takes place between a son and his father, an employer and an employee, two sisters, a teacher and a student, two lovers, two friends, and so on. Although largely dyadic in nature, interpersonal communication is often extended to include small intimate groups such as the family. Even within a family, however, the communication that takes place is often dyadic—mother to child, sister to sister, and so on.

Not only are the individuals simply “connected,” they are also *interdependent*: What one person does has an effect on the other person. The actions of one person have consequences for the other person. In a family, for example, a child's trouble with the police will affect the parents, other siblings, extended family members, and perhaps friends and neighbors.

Interpersonal Communication Is Inherently Relational

Because of this interdependency, interpersonal communication is inevitably and essentially relational in nature. Interpersonal communication takes place in a relationship, it



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“Analyzing an Interaction” at
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Blog Post

The Communication Blog

Throughout the text, you will find invitations to visit The Communication Blog at tcbdevito.blogspot.com for additional coverage of a topic and relevant websites. Read the comments of others and comment as you wish.



affects the relationship, it defines the relationship. The way you communicate is determined in great part by the kind of relationship that exists between you and the other person. You interact differently with your interpersonal communication instructor and your best friend; you interact with a sibling in ways very different from the ways you interact with a neighbor, a work colleague, or a casual acquaintance.

But notice also that the way you communicate will influence the kind of relationship you have. If you interact in friendly ways, you're likely to develop a friendship. If you regularly exchange hateful and hurtful messages, you're likely to develop an antagonistic relationship. If you each regularly express respect and support for each other, a respectful and supportive relationship is likely to develop. This is surely one of the most obvious observations you can make about interpersonal communication. And yet so many seem not to appreciate this very clear relationship between what you say and the relationship that develops (or deteriorates).

Interpersonal Communication Exists on a Continuum

Interpersonal communication exists along a continuum (see Figure 1.1), ranging from relatively impersonal at one end to highly personal at the other (Miller, 1978, 1990). At the impersonal end of the continuum, you have simple conversation between people who, we'd say, really don't know each other—the server and the customer, for example. At the highly personal end is the communication that takes place between people who are intimately interconnected—a father and son, two longtime lovers, or best friends, for example. A few characteristics distinguish the impersonal from the personal forms of communication and are presented in Table 1.1 (Miller, 1978).

Interpersonal Communication Involves Verbal and Nonverbal Messages

The interpersonal interaction involves the exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages. The words you use as well as your facial expressions—your eye contact and your body posture, for example—send messages. Likewise, you receive messages through your sense of hearing as well as through your other senses, especially visual and touch. Even silence sends messages. These messages, as you'll see throughout this course, will vary greatly depending on the other factors involved in the interaction. You don't talk to a best friend in the same way you talk to your college professor or your parents.

One of the great myths in communication is that nonverbal communication accounts for more than 90 percent of the meaning of any message. Actually, it depends. In some situations, the nonverbal signals will carry more of your meaning than the words



FIGURE 1.1

An Interpersonal Continuum

Here is one possible interpersonal continuum. Other people would position the relationships differently. You may want to try constructing an interpersonal continuum of your own relationships.

TABLE 1.1

IMPERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Impersonal Communication

Social role information: You interact largely on the basis of the social roles you occupy; for example, server and customer, cab driver and passenger.

Social rules: You interact according to the social rules defining your interaction; for example, as a server, you would greet the customers, hand them menus, and ask if there was anything else you could do.

Social messages: You exchange messages in a narrow range of topics—you talk to the server about food and service, not about your parents' divorce—with little emotion and little self-disclosure.

Interpersonal Communication

Personal information: You interact largely on the basis of personal roles; for example, friends, lovers, parents and children, cousins.

Personal rules: You interact according to the rules you both have established rather than to any societal rules; the mother and daughter follow the rules they themselves have established over the years.

Personal messages: You exchange messages on a broad range of topics—you talk about food and also about your parents' divorce—with much emotion and self-disclosure.

you use. In other situations, the verbal signals will communicate more information. Most often, of course, they work together, and, rather than focusing on which channel communicates the greater percentage of meaning, it's more important to focus on the ways in which verbal and nonverbal messages occur together.

Interpersonal Communication Exists in Varied Forms

Often, interpersonal communication takes place face to face: talking with other students before class, interacting with family or friends over dinner, trading secrets with intimates. This is the type of interaction that probably comes to mind when you think of interpersonal communication. But, of course, much conversation takes place online. Online communication is a major part of people's interpersonal experience throughout the world. Such communications are important personally, socially, and professionally.

The major online types of conversation differ from one another and from face-to-face interaction in important ways. A few of the major similarities and differences are pointed out here (also see Table 1.2).

Some computer-mediated communication (for example, e-mail, tweets, or posts on Facebook) is **asynchronous**, meaning that it does not take place in real time. You may send your message today, but the receiver may not read it for a week and may take another week to respond. Consequently, much of the spontaneity created by real-time communication is lost here. You may, for example, be very enthusiastic about a topic when you send your e-mail but practically forget it by the time someone responds. E-mail is also virtually inerasable, a feature that has important consequences and that we discuss later in this chapter.

Through instant messaging, you interact online in (essentially) real time; the communication messages are **synchronous**—they occur at the same time and are similar to phone communication except that IM is text-based rather than voice-based. Through IM you can also play games, share files, listen to music, send messages to cell phones, announce company meetings, and do a great deal else with short, abbreviated messages. Among college students, as you probably know, the major purpose of IM seems to be to maintain “social connectedness” (Kindred & Roper, 2004).

TABLE 1.2

FACE-TO-FACE AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Throughout this text, face-to-face and computer-mediated communication are discussed, compared, and contrasted. Here is a brief summary of just some communication concepts and some of the ways in which these two forms of communication are similar and different.

Human Communication Element	Face-to-Face Communication	Computer-Mediated Communication
Source		
<i>Presentation of self and impression management</i>	Personal characteristics are open to visual inspection; disguise is difficult.	Personal characteristics are revealed when you want to reveal them; disguise is easy.
<i>Speaking turn</i>	You compete for speaker time with others; you can be interrupted.	It's always your turn; speaker time is unlimited; you can't be interrupted.
Receiver		
<i>Number</i>	One or a few who are in your visual field.	Virtually unlimited.
<i>Opportunity for interaction</i>	Limited to those who have the opportunity to meet.	Unlimited.
<i>Third parties</i>	Messages can be repeated to third parties but not with complete accuracy.	Messages can be retrieved by others or forwarded verbatim to anyone.
<i>Impression formation</i>	Impressions are based on the verbal and nonverbal cues the receiver perceives.	Impressions are based on text messages and posted photos and videos.
Context		
<i>Physical</i>	Essentially the same physical space.	Can be in the next cubicle or separated by miles.
<i>Temporal</i>	Communication is synchronous; messages are exchanged at the same (real) time.	Communication may be synchronous (as in chat rooms) or asynchronous (as in e-mail).
Channel		
	All senses participate in sending and receiving messages.	Visual (for text, photos, and videos) and auditory.
Message		
<i>Verbal and nonverbal</i>	Words, gestures, eye contact, accent, vocal cues, spatial relationships, touching, clothing, hair, etc.	Words, photos, videos, and audio messages.
<i>Permanence</i>	Temporary unless recorded; speech signals fade rapidly.	Messages are relatively permanent.

In chat rooms and social networking groups, you often communicate synchronously, when you and a friend are online at the same time, and asynchronously, when you're sending a message or writing on the wall of a friend who isn't online while you're writing. Social networking sites give you the great advantage of enabling you to communicate with people you would never meet or interact with otherwise. Because many of these groups are international, they provide excellent exposure to other cultures, other ideas, and other ways of communicating, and they are a good introduction to intercultural communication.

Interpersonal Communication Is Transactional

Some early theories viewed the communication process as linear (see Figure 1.2). In this linear view of communication, the speaker spoke and the listener listened; after the speaker finished speaking, the listener would speak. Communication was seen as proceeding in a relatively straight line. Speaking and listening were seen as taking place at different times—when you spoke, you didn't listen, and when you listened, you didn't speak. A more satisfying view (Figure 1.3), and the one currently held, sees communication as a transactional process in which each person serves simultaneously as speaker and listener. According to the transactional view, at the same time that you send messages, you're also receiving messages from your own communications and from the reactions of the other person. And at the same time that you're listening, you're also sending messages. In a transactional view, each person is seen as both speaker and listener, as simultaneously communicating and receiving messages.

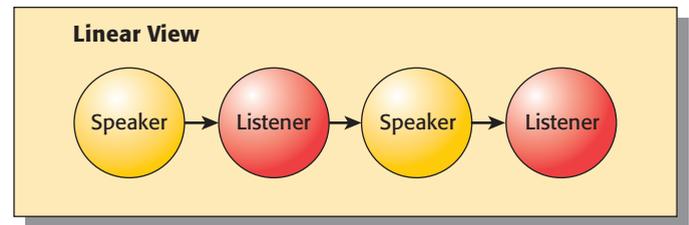


FIGURE 1.2
The Linear View of Interpersonal Communication

This figure represents a linear view of communication, in which the speaker speaks and the listener listens.



Explore the Exercise
"Models of Interpersonal Communication" at [MyCommunicationLab](#)

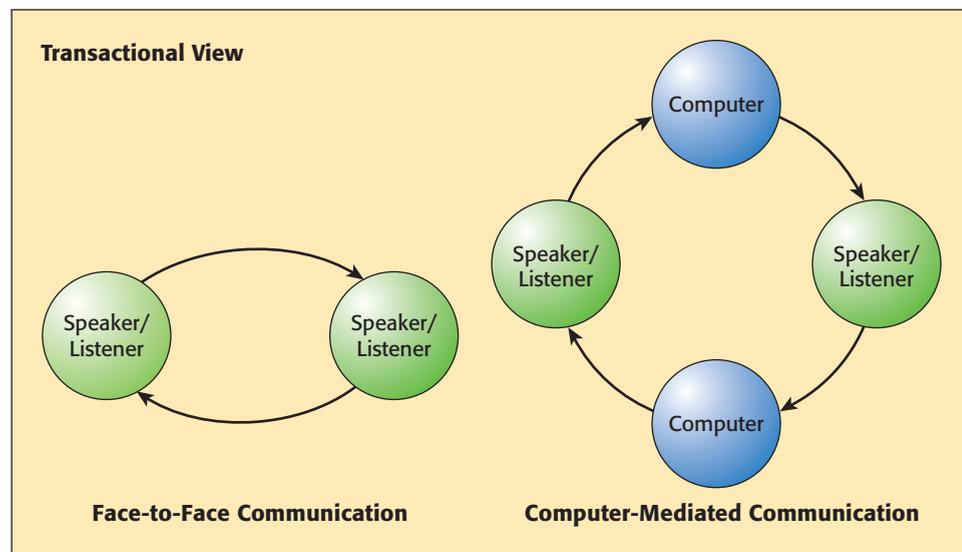


FIGURE 1.3
The Transactional View of Interpersonal Communication

This figure represents a transactional view, in which each person serves simultaneously as speaker and listener; at the same time that you send messages, you also receive messages from your own communications as well as from the reactions of the other person(s).

Interpersonal Communication Involves Choices

Throughout your interpersonal life and in each interpersonal interaction, you're presented with **choice points**—moments when you have to make a choice as to who you communicate with, what you say, what you don't say, how you phrase what you want to say, and so on. This course and this text aim to give you reasons grounded in interpersonal communication theory and research discussed throughout the text for the varied choices you'll be called upon to make in your interpersonal interactions. The course also aims to give you the skills you'll need to execute these well-reasoned choices.

You can look at the process of choice in terms of John Dewey's (1910) steps in reflective thinking, a model used by contemporary theorists for explaining small group problem solving and conflict resolution. It can also be used to explain the notion of choice in five steps.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Communicating an Image

A new position is opening at work, and you want it. Your immediate supervisor is likely the one to make the final decision. What are some of your options for making yourself look especially good so you can secure this new position?

- *Step 1: The problem.* View a communication interaction as a problem to be resolved, as a situation to be addressed. Here you try to understand the nature of the communication situation, what elements are involved, and, in the words of one communication model, who did what to whom with what effect. Let's say that your "problem" is that you said something you shouldn't have and it's created a problem between you and your friend, romantic partner, or family member. You need to resolve this problem.
- *Step 2: The criteria.* Here you ask yourself what your specific communication goal is. What do you want your message to accomplish? For example, you want to admit your mistake, apologize, and be forgiven.
- *Step 3: The possible solutions.* Here you ask yourself what some of your communication choices are. What are some of the messages you might communicate?
- *Step 4: The analysis.* Here you identify the advantages and disadvantages of each communication choice.
- *Step 5: The selection and execution.* Here you communicate what you hope will resolve the problem and get you forgiveness.

As a student of interpersonal communication, you would later reflect on this communication situation and identify what you learned, what you did well, and what you could have done differently.



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Can you define interpersonal communication and explain its major characteristics (interpersonal communication involves interdependent individuals, is inherently relational, exists on a continuum, involves both verbal and nonverbal messages, exists in varied forms, is transactional, and involves choices)?

THE ELEMENTS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Given the basic definition of interpersonal communication, the transactional perspective, and an understanding that interpersonal communication occurs in many different forms, let's look at each of the essential elements in interpersonal communication: source–receiver, messages, feedback, feedforward, channel, noise, context, and competence (see Figure 1.4). Along with this discussion, you may wish to visit the websites of some of the major communication organizations to see how they discuss communication. See, for example, the websites of the National Communication Association, the International Communication Association, and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication for three major academic associations in communication. URLs for the major communication association are also given on The Communication Blog at <http://tcbdevito.blogspot.com>.

Source–Receiver

Interpersonal communication involves at least two persons. Each functions as a **source** (formulates and sends messages) and operates as a **receiver** (receives and understands messages). The linked term *source–receiver* emphasizes that each person is both source and receiver.

By putting your meanings into sound waves and gestures, facial expressions, or body movements, you're putting your thoughts and feelings into a **code**, or a set of symbols—a process called *encoding*. When you translate those symbols into ideas, you're taking them out of the code they're in, a process called *decoding*. So we can call speakers (or, more generally, senders) **encoders**: those who put their meanings *into* a code. And we can call listeners (or, more generally, receivers) **decoders**: those who take meanings *out of* a code. Since encoding and decoding activities are combined in each person, the term *encoding–decoding* is used to emphasize this inevitable dual function.

Usually you encode an idea into a code that the other person understands; for example, you use words and gestures for which both you and the other person have similar meanings. At times, however, you may want to exclude others; so, for example, you might speak in a language that only one of your listeners knows or use jargon to prevent others from understanding. At other times, you may assume incorrectly that the other person knows your code and unknowingly use words or gestures the other person simply doesn't understand. For interpersonal communication to occur, then, meanings must be both encoded and decoded. If Jamie has his eyes closed and is wearing stereo headphones as his dad is speaking to him, interpersonal communication is not taking place—simply because the messages—both verbal and nonverbal—are not being received.

Messages

For interpersonal communication to exist, **messages** that express your thoughts and feelings must be sent and received. Interpersonal communication may be verbal or nonverbal, but it's usually a combination of both. You communicate interpersonally with words as well as with gestures, emoticons, varied fonts, touch, photos, videos, and audio, for example. Everything about you has the potential to send interpersonal messages, and every message has an **effect**, or outcome. In face-to-face communication, your messages are both verbal and nonverbal; you supplement your words with facial expressions, body movements, and variations in vocal volume and rate. When you communicate through a keyboard, your message is communicated with words as well as with photos and videos, for example.

Four important types of messages need to be mentioned here: workplace, metames-
sages, feedback, and feedforward.

WORKPLACE MESSAGES In the workplace, messages are often classified in terms of their direction.

- **Upward communication** consists of messages sent from the lower levels of a hierarchy to the upper levels—for example, line worker to manager or faculty member to dean. This type of communication usually is concerned with job-related activities and problems; ideas for change and suggestions for improvement; and feelings about the organization, work, other workers, or similar issues.
- **Downward communication** consists of messages sent from the higher levels to the lower levels of the hierarchy; for example, messages sent by managers to workers. Common forms of downward communication include orders; explanations of procedures, goals, and changes; and appraisals of workers.

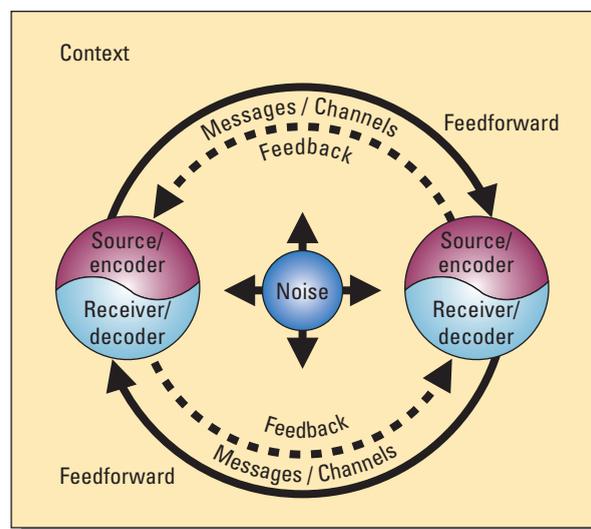


FIGURE 1.4
The Process of Interpersonal Communication

This model puts into visual form the various elements of the interpersonal communication process. How would you diagram the interpersonal communication process?



VIEWPOINTS Interpersonal communication in the workplace

Managers and employment interviewers routinely list interpersonal skills among the most important job-related skills in a desirable employee. In what ways do you see interpersonal communication skills being important in your current or future work life?

competence in metacommunication. For example, in conflict situations, it's often helpful to talk about the way you argue or what your raised voice means. In romantic relationships, it may be helpful to talk about what each of you means by "exclusive" or "love." On the job, it's often necessary to talk about the ways people delegate orders or express criticism.



Explore the **Exercise**
"How Would You Give
Feedback?" at
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FEEDBACK MESSAGES Feedback is a special type of message that conveys information about the messages you send. When you send a spoken or written message to another person or post on a social media site, you get feedback from your own message: You hear what you say, you feel the way you move, you see what you write. On the basis of this information, you may correct yourself, rephrase something, or perhaps smile at a clever turn of phrase.

You also get feedback from others. The person with whom you're communicating is constantly sending you messages that indicate how he or she is receiving and responding to your messages. Nods of agreement, smiles, puzzled looks, likes, and questions asking for clarification are all examples of feedback. In fact, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that one of the main purposes of posting to social media sites is to get positive feedback from others—likes, +1s, thumbs up, blog comments, and retweets, for example.

Notice that in face-to-face communication you can monitor the feedback of the other person as you're speaking. In much online communication, however, that feedback will often come much later and thus is likely to be more clearly thought out and perhaps more closely monitored. Also, when you give feedback on social media sites such as Facebook by hitting the "like" button, your feedback is not limited to the person whose post you like; your feedback goes on your page and is visible to everyone who looks at your site.



VIEWPOINTS Feedback

What effect do you think feedback has in establishing and maintaining satisfying friendships or romantic relationships? How would you characterize ideal relationship feedback?

- **Lateral communication** refers to messages between equals—manager-to-manager, worker-to-worker. Lateral communication is the kind of communication that takes place between two history professors at Illinois State University or between a bond trader and an equities trader at a brokerage house.
- **Grapevine communication** messages don't follow the formal lines of communication established in an organization. Grapevine messages concern job-related issues that you want to discuss in a more interpersonal setting; for example, organizational issues that have not yet been made public, the real relationship among the regional managers, or possible changes that are being considered but not yet finalized.

METAMESSAGES One very special type of message is the metamessage. This type of message refers to other messages; it's a message about a message. Both verbal and nonverbal messages can be metacommunicational. Verbally, you can convey metamessages such as "Do you understand what I'm saying?" Nonverbally, you can wink to communicate that you're lying or being sarcastic. Your interpersonal effectiveness will often hinge on your

FEEDFORWARD MESSAGES Much as feedback contains information about messages already sent, **feedforward** conveys information about messages before you send them. For example, you might use feedforward to express your wanting to chat a bit and say something like, “Hey, I haven’t seen you the entire week; what’s been going on?” Or you might give a brief preview of your main message and say something like, “You’d better sit down for this; you’re going to be shocked.” Or you might send someone a complimentary note before asking them to be your “friend.” Or you might ask others to hear you out before they judge you. The subject heading on your e-mail, the tag line after your name on your social media site, and the phone numbers and names that come up on your cell phone are likewise clear examples of feedforward. These messages tell the listener something about the messages to come or about the way you’d like the listener to respond. Nonverbally, you give feedforward by your facial expressions, eye contact, and physical posture; with these nonverbal messages, you tell the other person something about the messages you’ll be sending. A smile may signal a pleasant message; eye avoidance may signal that the message to come is difficult and perhaps uncomfortable to express.

Channel

The communication **channel** is the medium through which message signals pass. The channel works like a bridge connecting source and receiver. Normally, two, three, or four channels are used simultaneously. For example, in face-to-face speech interactions, you speak and listen, using the vocal–auditory channel. You also, however, make gestures and receive these signals visually, using the visual channel. Similarly, you emit odors and smell those of others (using the chemical channel). Often you touch one another, and this too communicates (using the tactile channel).

Another way to classify channels is by the means of communication. Thus, face-to-face contact, telephones, e-mail, movies, television, smoke signals, and telegraph would be types of channels. Of most relevance today, of course, is the difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated interpersonal communication: interaction through e-mail, social network sites, instant messaging, news postings, film, television, radio, or fax.

In many of today’s organizations (and increasingly in many private lives), workers/people are experiencing **information overload**, which occurs when you have to deal with an excessive amount of information and when much of that information is ambiguous or complex. As you can easily appreciate, advances in information technology have led to increasingly greater information overload. Having hundreds of friends who post hundreds of messages, photos, and videos create information overload in even the youngest social media users.

One of the problems with information overload is that it absorbs an enormous amount of time for workers at all levels of an organization. The more messages you have to deal with, the less time you have for those messages or tasks that are central to your functions. Research finds that when you’re overloaded, you’re more likely to respond to simpler messages and to generate simpler messages, which may not always be appropriate (Jones, Ravid, & Rafaeli, 2004). Similarly,



“I used to call people, then I got into e-mailing, then texting, and now I just ignore everyone.”

Alex Gregory/The New Yorker Collection/
www.cartoonbank.com

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Giving Feedforward

The grades were just posted for a course, and you see that your dorm mate failed. You got an A. Your dorm mate asks you about the grades. You feel you want to preface your remarks. What kind of feedforward might you give in this case?



Explore the **Exercise**
“How to Give Feedforward
Messages” at
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INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Channels

You want to ask someone out on a date and are considering how you might go about this. What are your choices among channels? Which channel would be the most effective? Which channel would provoke the least anxiety?

errors become more likely simply because you cannot devote the needed time to any one item. Information overload has even been linked to health problems in more than one-third of managers (Lee, 2000). *Technostress* is a new term that denotes the anxiety and stress resulting from a feeling of being controlled by the overwhelming amount of information and from the inability to manage the information in the time available.

Noise

Noise is anything that interferes with your receiving a message. Just as messages may be auditory or visual, noise, too, comes in both auditory and visual forms. Four types of noise are especially relevant:

- *Physical noise* is interference that is external to both speaker and listener; it hampers the physical transmission of the signal or message and includes impediments such as the screeching of passing cars, the hum of a computer, sunglasses, extraneous messages, illegible handwriting, blurred type or fonts that are too small or difficult to read, misspellings and poor grammar, and pop-up ads.
- *Physiological noise* is created by barriers within the sender or receiver and includes impairments such as loss of vision, hearing loss, articulation problems, and memory loss.
- *Psychological noise* is mental interference in speaker or listener and includes preconceived ideas, wandering thoughts, biases and prejudices, closed-mindedness, and extreme emotionalism.
- *Semantic noise* is interference created when the speaker and listener have different meaning systems; types of semantic noise include linguistic or dialectical differences, the use of jargon or overly complex terms, and ambiguous or overly abstract terms whose meanings can be easily misinterpreted.

A useful concept in understanding noise and its importance in communication is **signal-to-noise ratio**. In this phrase, the term *signal* refers to information that you'd find useful; *noise* refers to information that is useless (to you). So, for example, mailing lists or blogs that contain lots of useful information would be high on signal and low on noise; those that contain lots of useless information would be high on noise and low on signal.

All communications contain noise. Noise cannot be totally eliminated, but its effects can be reduced. Making your language more precise, sharpening your skills for sending and receiving nonverbal messages, and improving your listening and feedback skills are some ways to combat the influence of noise.

Context

Communication always takes place within a context: an environment that influences the form and the content of communication. At times, this context is so natural that you ignore it, like street noise. At other times, the context stands out, and the ways in which it restricts or stimulates your communications are obvious. Think, for example, of the different ways you'd talk at a funeral, in a quiet restaurant, and at a rock concert. And consider how the same "How are you?" will have very different meanings depending on the context: Said to a passing acquaintance, it means "Hello," whereas said to a sick friend in the hospital, it means "How are you feeling?"

The **context of communication** has at least four dimensions: physical, social-psychological, temporal, and cultural.

- *Physical dimension*. The room, workplace, or outdoor space in which communication takes place—the tangible or concrete environment—is the physical dimension. When you communicate with someone face to face, you're both in essentially the same physical environment. In computer-mediated communication, you may be in

Blog Post

Noise

Noise of a somewhat different type is discussed in "The Chain Letter as Dysfunctional Communication" at tcbdevito.blogspot.com. What's your opinion of the chain letter? Are there some chain letters that you view more positively than others?



INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Noise Reduction

Looking around your classroom (or your room, if you're taking the course online), what are some of the things you can do to reduce physical noise?

drastically different environments; one of you may be on a beach in San Juan, and the other may be in a Wall Street office.

- *Social–psychological dimension.* This includes, for example, the status relationships among the participants: distinctions such as employer versus the employee or the salesperson versus the store owner. The formality or informality, the friendliness or hostility, the cooperativeness or competitiveness of the interaction are also part of the social–psychological dimension.
- *Temporal or time dimension.* This dimension has to do with where a particular message fits into a sequence of communication events. For example, if you tell a joke about sickness immediately after your friend tells you she is sick, the joke will be perceived differently from the same joke told as one of a series of similar jokes to your friends in the locker room of the gym.
- *Cultural dimension.* The cultural dimension consists of the rules, norms, beliefs, and attitudes of the people communicating that are passed from one generation to another. For example, in some cultures, it’s considered polite to talk to strangers; in others, that is something to be avoided.

VIDEO CHOICE POINT



Summer Internship

Margo, a student mentor at an entertainment magazine publisher, wants to say the right thing in her mentoring discussions with a group of interns. Margo’s immediate problem is that she just learned that the interns have done questionable things on Facebook—posted inappropriate pictures, used biased language, and in general portrayed themselves as not serious professionals. She wants to make them aware of how damaging this could be in their career, but wonders how she should communicate it to them. She considers the topics covered in

this chapter and wonders about, for example, the options she has in selecting the context in which the communication is to occur and what influences each context will have on the eventual effectiveness of her message. What options does she have for expressing her message in terms, say, of formality–informality or friendly–businesslike, and what differences will these choices make in her effectiveness? See how her choices play out in the video “Summer Internship,” and respond to the questions posed.



Watch the Video “Summer Internship” at [MyCommunicationLab](#)



Can you draw/diagram a model of communication that contains source–receiver, messages, channel, noise, and context and illustrates the relationship among these elements? Can you define each of these elements?

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Another way to define interpersonal communication is to consider its major principles. These principles are significant in terms of explaining theory and also, as you’ll see, have very practical applications.



Watch the Video
“Going Up”
at [MyCommunicationLab](#)

Interpersonal Communication Is Purposeful

Interpersonal communication can be used to accomplish a variety of purposes. Understanding how interpersonal communication serves these varied purposes will help you more effectively achieve your own interpersonal goals.



VIEWPOINTS Interpersonal metaphors

How would you explain interpersonal communication or interpersonal relationships in terms of metaphors such as a seesaw, a ball game, a flower, ice skates, a microscope, a television sitcom, a work of art, a book, a rubber band, or a software program?

- Staying in touch with friends
- Staying in touch with family
- Connecting with friends with whom you've lost contact
- Connecting with those who share your interests
- Making new friends
- Reading comments by celebrities
- Finding romantic partners

Popular belief and recent research both agree that men and women use communication for different purposes. Generally, men seem to communicate more for information whereas women seem to communicate more for relationship purposes (Colley et al., 2004; Shaw & Grant, 2002). Gender differences also occur in computer communication. For example, women ICQ users chat more for relationship reasons while men chat more to play and to relax (Leung, 2001).

Interpersonal Communication Is a Package of Signals

Communication behaviors, whether they involve verbal messages, gestures, or some combination thereof, usually occur in “packages” (Pittenger, Hockett, & Danehy, 1960). Usually, verbal and nonverbal behaviors reinforce or support each other. All parts of a message system normally work together to communicate a particular meaning. You don't

- *To learn.* Interpersonal communication enables you to learn, to better understand the world of objects, events, and people—whether you do this face to face or online. In fact, your beliefs, attitudes, and values are probably influenced more by interpersonal encounters than by formal education. Through interpersonal communication, you also learn about yourself—your strengths and your weaknesses.
- *To relate.* Interpersonal communication helps you relate to others and to form meaningful relationships whether it's face to face or online. Such relationships help to alleviate loneliness and depression, enable you to share and heighten your pleasures, and generally make you feel more positive about yourself.
- *To influence.* Very likely, you influence the attitudes and behaviors of others in your interpersonal encounters—to vote a particular way, to try a new diet, to see a movie, or to believe that something is true or false—the list is endless.
- *To help.* Therapists serve a helping function professionally by offering guidance through interpersonal interaction. But everyone interacts to help in everyday life: Online and offline, you console a friend who has broken off a love affair, counsel a student about courses to take, or offer advice to a colleague at work.
- *To play.* Tweeting your weekend activities, discussing sports or dates, posting a clever joke or photo on some social media site, and in general just passing the time are play functions. Far from frivolous, this extremely important purpose gives your activities a necessary balance and your mind a needed break from all the seriousness around you.

In research on the motivations/purposes for using social networking sites, it's the relationship purpose that dominates. One research study, for example, finds the following motivations/purposes, in order of frequency mentioned (Smith, 2011). As you'll see, the reasons are mostly to relate, but the other purposes are likely served in the process.

express fear with words while the rest of your body is relaxed. You don't express anger through your posture while your face smiles. Your entire body works together—verbally and nonverbally—to express your thoughts and feelings.

You probably pay little attention to its “packaged” nature. It goes unnoticed. But when there's an incongruity—when the chilly handshake belies the verbal greeting, when the nervous posture belies the focused stare, when the constant preening belies the expressions of being comfortable and at ease—you take notice. Invariably you begin to question the credibility, the sincerity, and the honesty of the individual.

Often, contradictory messages are sent over a period of time. Note, for example, that in the following interaction the employee is being given two directives: (1) Use initiative, and (2) don't use initiative. Regardless of what he or she does, rejection will follow.

Employer: You've got to learn to take more initiative. You never seem to take charge, to take control.

Employee: (Takes the initiative, makes decisions.)

Employer: You've got to learn to follow the chain of command and not do things just because you want to.

Employee: (Goes back to old ways, not taking any initiative.)

Employer: Well, I told you. We expect more initiative from you.

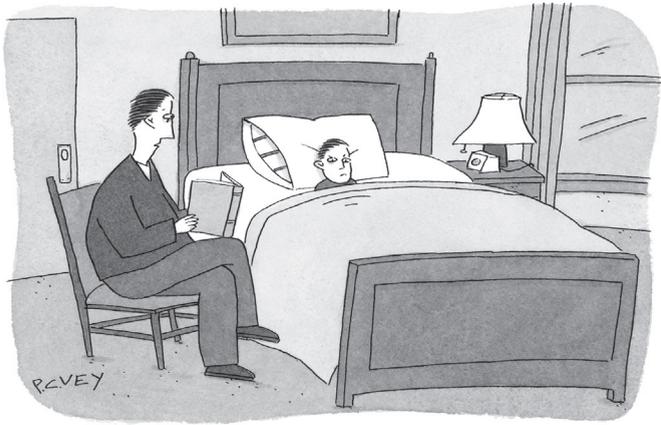
Contradictory messages may be the result of the desire to communicate two different emotions or feelings. For example, you may like a person and want to communicate a positive feeling, but you may also feel resentment toward this person and want to communicate a negative feeling as well. The result is that you communicate both feelings; for example, you say that you're happy to see the person, but your facial expression and body posture communicate your negative feelings (Beier, 1974). In this example, and in many similar cases, the socially acceptable message is usually communicated verbally, whereas the less socially acceptable message is communicated nonverbally.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Content and Relationship Messages

Interpersonal messages combine content and relationship dimensions. **Content messages** focus on the real world, to something external to both speaker and listener. **Relationship messages**, on the other hand, focus on the relationship/connection between the individuals. For example, a supervisor may say to a trainee, “See me after the meeting.” This simple message has a content message that tells the trainee to see the supervisor after the meeting. It also contains a relationship message that says something about the connection between the supervisor and the trainee. Even the use of the simple command shows there is a status difference that allows the supervisor to command the trainee. You can appreciate this most clearly if you visualize this command being made by the trainee to the supervisor. It appears awkward and out of place because it violates the normal relationship between supervisor and trainee.

Deborah Tannen, in her book *You're Wearing That?* (2006), gives lots of examples of content and relationship communication and the problems that can result from different interpretations. For example, the mother who says, “Are you going to quarter those tomatoes?” thinks she is communicating solely a content message. To the daughter, however, the message is largely relational and is in fact a criticism of the way she intends to cut the tomatoes. Questions, especially, may appear to be objective and focused on content but often are perceived as attacks, as in the title of Tannen's book. For example, here are some questions that you may have been asked—or that you yourself may have asked. Try identifying the potential relationship messages that the listener might receive in each case.

- You're *calling* me?
- Did you say you're *applying* to medical school?
- You're *in* love?
- You paid \$100 for that?
- And that's all you *did*?



“It’s not about the story. It’s about Daddy taking time out of his busy day to read you a story.”

P. C. Vey/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Many conflicts arise because people misunderstand relationship messages and cannot clarify them. Other problems arise when people fail to see the difference between content messages and relationship messages. Arguments over the content dimension of a message—such as what happened in a movie—are relatively easy to resolve. You may, for example, simply ask a third person what took place or see the movie again. Arguments on the relationship level, however, are much more difficult to resolve, in part because people seldom recognize that the argument is about relationship messages.

Interpersonal Communication Is a Process of Adjustment

The principle of **adjustment** states that interpersonal communication can take place only to the extent that the people talking share the same communication system. We

can easily understand this when dealing with speakers of two different languages; much miscommunication is likely to occur. The principle, however, takes on particular relevance when you realize that no two people share identical communication systems. Parents and children, for example, not only have very different vocabularies but also, more importantly, have different meanings for some of the terms they have in common. (Consider, for example, the differences between parents’ and children’s understanding of such terms as *music*, *success*, and *family*.) Different cultures and social groups, even when they share a common language, also have different nonverbal communication systems. To the extent that these systems differ, communication will be hindered.

Part of the art of interpersonal communication is learning the other person’s signals, how they’re used, and what they mean. People in close relationships—either as intimate friends or as romantic partners—realize that learning the other person’s signals takes a long time and, often, great patience. If you want to understand what another person means—by smiling, by saying “I love you,” by arguing about trivial matters, by making self-deprecating comments—you have to learn that person’s system

of signals. Furthermore, you have to share your own system of signals with others so that they can better understand you. Although some people may know what you mean by your

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Corrective Messaging

In the heat of an argument, you said you never wanted to see your partner’s family again. Your partner reciprocated, saying the feeling was mutual. Now, weeks later, there remains great tension between you, especially when you find yourself with one or both families. What communication choices do you have for apologizing and putting this angry outburst behind you? What channel would you use?

SKILL BUILDING EXERCISE

Distinguishing Content and Relationship Messages

How would you communicate both the content and the relationship messages in the following situations?

1. After a date that you didn’t enjoy and don’t want to repeat ever again, you want to express your sincere thanks, but you don’t want to be misinterpreted as communicating any indication that you would go on another date with this person.
2. You’re ready to commit yourself to a long-term relationship but want your partner to sign a prenuptial agreement before moving any further in the relationship. You need to communicate both your
3. desire to keep your money and to move the relationship to the next level.
3. You’re interested in dating a friend on Facebook who also attends the college you do and with whom you’ve been chatting for a few weeks. But you don’t know if the feeling is mutual. You want to ask for the date but to do so in a way that, if you’re turned down, you won’t be embarrassed.

Content and relationship messages serve different communication functions. Being able to distinguish between them is prerequisite to using and responding to them effectively.

silence or by your avoidance of eye contact, others may not. You cannot expect others to decode your behaviors accurately without help.

This principle is especially important in intercultural communication, largely because people from different cultures use different signals and sometimes the same signals to signify quite different things. In much of the United States, focused eye contact means honesty and openness. But in Japan and in many Hispanic cultures, that same behavior may signify arrogance or disrespect if engaged in by, say, a youngster with someone significantly older.

An interesting theory largely revolving around adjustment is **communication accommodation theory**. This theory holds that speakers will adjust to or accommodate to the speaking style of their listeners to gain social approval and greater communication efficiency (Giles, 2009; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987). For example, when two people have a similar speech rate, they seem to be attracted to each other more than to those with dissimilar rates (Buller, LePoire, Aune, & Eloy, 1992). Another study even showed that people accommodate in their e-mail. For example, responses to messages that contain politeness cues were significantly more polite than responses to e-mails that did not contain such cues (Bunz & Campbell, 2004). So, for example, if you say “thank you” and “please,” others are more likely to use politeness cues as well.

Interpersonal Communication Involves Power

Power is a major component of interpersonal communication. You cannot communicate without making some implicit comment on your power or lack of it. When in an interactional situation, therefore, recognize that on the basis of your verbal and nonverbal messages, people will assess your power and will interact accordingly.

No interpersonal relationship exists without a power dimension. Look at your own relationships and those of your friends and relatives. In each relationship, one person has more power than the other. In interpersonal relationships among most Americans, the more powerful person is often the one who is more attractive or the one who has more money. In other cultures the factors that contribute to power may be different and may include a person’s family background, age, education, or wisdom.

Although all relationships involve power, they differ in the types of power that the people use and to which they respond. Before reading about the different types of power, take the following self-test.

Research has identified six types of power: legitimate, referent, reward, coercive, expert, and information or persuasion (French & Raven, 1968; Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975). As you listen to the messages of others (and your own) and as you observe the relationships of others (and your own), consider the role of power, how it’s expressed, and how it’s responded to. The more sensitive you become to the expression of power—in messages and in relationships—the more effective your interpersonal messages are likely to be.

- You hold **legitimate power** (self-test statement 1) when others believe you have a right—by virtue of your position—to influence or control their behaviors. For example, as an employer, judge, manager, or police officer, you’d have legitimate power by virtue of these roles. Relate your persuasive arguments and appeals to your own role and credibility.
- You have **referent power** (statement 2) when others wish to be like you. Referent power holders are often attractive, have considerable prestige, and are well liked and well respected. For example, you might have referent power over a younger brother because he wants to be like you. Demonstrate those qualities admired by those you wish to influence.
- You have **reward power** (statement 3) when you control the rewards that others want. Rewards may be material (money, promotion, jewelry) or social (love, friendship, respect). For example, teachers have reward power over students because they control grades, letters of recommendation, and social approval. Make rewards contingent on compliance, and follow through by rewarding those who comply with your requests.

Blog Post

Principles of Communication

For an application of some of these principles to a letter to Dear Abby, see “It’s About Communication, Abby” at tcbdevito.blogspot.com. How would you have answered this writer’s letter?



INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Unwanted Talk

Your supervisor at work continually talks about sex. You fear your lack of reaction has been interpreted as a sign of approval. You need to change that but at the same time not alienate the person who can fire you. What are some of things you might do to stop this unwanted talk?

TEST YOURSELF

How Powerful Are You?

For each statement, indicate how appropriate it is to you. Use a ten-point scale with 1 = not true of me at all and 10 = very true of me. Use 5 if you don't know or aren't sure.

- ___ 1. My position is such that I often have to tell others what to do. For example, a mother's position demands that she tell her children what to do, a manager's position demands that he or she tell employees what to do, and so on.
- ___ 2. People wish to be like me or identified with me. For example, high school football players may admire the former professional football player who is now their coach and want to be like him.
- ___ 3. People see me as having the ability to give them what they want. For example, employers have the ability to give their employees increased pay, longer vacations, or improved working conditions.
- ___ 4. People see me as having the ability to administer punishment or to withhold things they want. For example, employers have the ability to reduce

voluntary overtime, shorten vacation time, or fail to improve working conditions.

- ___ 5. Other people realize that I have expertise in certain areas of knowledge. For example, a doctor has expertise in medicine and so others turn to the doctor to tell them what to do.
- ___ 6. Other people realize that I possess the communication ability to present an argument logically and persuasively.

How Did You Do? These statements refer to the six major types of power, as described in the text. Low scores (1s, 2s, and 3s) indicate your belief that you possess little of these particular types of power, and high scores (8s, 9s, and 10s) indicate your belief that you possess a great deal of these particular types of power.

What Will You Do? How satisfied are you with your level of power? If you're not satisfied, what might you do about it? A good starting place, of course, is to learn the skills of interpersonal communication discussed in this text.

- You have **coercive power** (statement 4) when you have the ability to administer punishments to or remove rewards from others if they do not do as you wish. For example, teachers may give poor grades or withhold recommendations. Make clear the negative consequences that are likely to follow noncompliance.
- You have **expert power** (statement 5) when others see you as having expertise or knowledge. Your expert power increases when you're seen as unbiased with nothing personally to gain from exerting this power. For example, judges have expert power in legal matters, and doctors have expert power in medical matters. Cultivate your own expertise, and connect your persuasive appeals to this expertise.
- You have **information or persuasion power** (statement 6) when others see you as having the ability to communicate logically and persuasively. For example, researchers and scientists may be given information power because of their being perceived as informed and critical thinkers. Increase your communication competence; this book's major function, of course, is to explain ways for you to accomplish this.

Interpersonal Communication Is Ambiguous

All messages are ambiguous to some degree. **Ambiguity** is a condition in which a message can be interpreted as having more than one meaning. Sometimes ambiguity results when we use words that can be interpreted differently. Informal time terms offer good examples; different people may interpret terms such as *soon*, *right away*, *in a minute*, *early*, and *late* very differently. The terms themselves are ambiguous.

Some degree of ambiguity exists in all interpersonal communication. When you express an idea, you never communicate your meaning exactly and totally; rather, you communicate your meaning with some reasonable accuracy—enough to give the other person a reasonably clear idea of what you mean. Sometimes, of course, you're

less accurate than you anticipated and your listener “gets the wrong idea” or “gets offended” when you only meant to be humorous or “misunderstands your emotional meaning.” Because of this inevitable uncertainty, you may qualify what you’re saying, give an example, or ask, “Do you know what I mean?” These clarifying tactics help the other person understand your meaning and reduce uncertainty (to some degree).

Similarly, all relationships contain uncertainty. Consider a close interpersonal relationship of your own, and ask yourself the following questions. Answer each question according to a six-point scale on which 1 means “completely or almost completely uncertain” and 6 means “completely or almost completely certain.” How certain are you about these questions?

1. Do you know what you can and cannot say to each other? Are there certain topics that will cause problems?
2. Do you know how your partner feels about you, and does your partner know how you feel about him or her?
3. Do you know how you and your partner would characterize and describe the relationship? Would it be similar? Different? If different, in what ways?
4. How does your partner see the future of the relationship? Does your partner know how you feel about the relationship’s future?

Very likely you were not able to respond with “6” for all four questions. And it’s equally likely that your relationship partner would be unable to respond to every question with a 6. These questions, paraphrased from a relationship uncertainty scale (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999)—and similar others—illustrate that you probably experience some degree of uncertainty about the norms that govern your relationship communication (question 1), the degree to which the two of you see the relationship in similar ways (question 2), the definition of the relationship (question 3), and/or the relationship’s future (question 4).

The skills of interpersonal communication presented throughout this text can give you tools for appropriately reducing ambiguity and making your meanings as unambiguous as possible.

Interpersonal Communication Is Punctuated

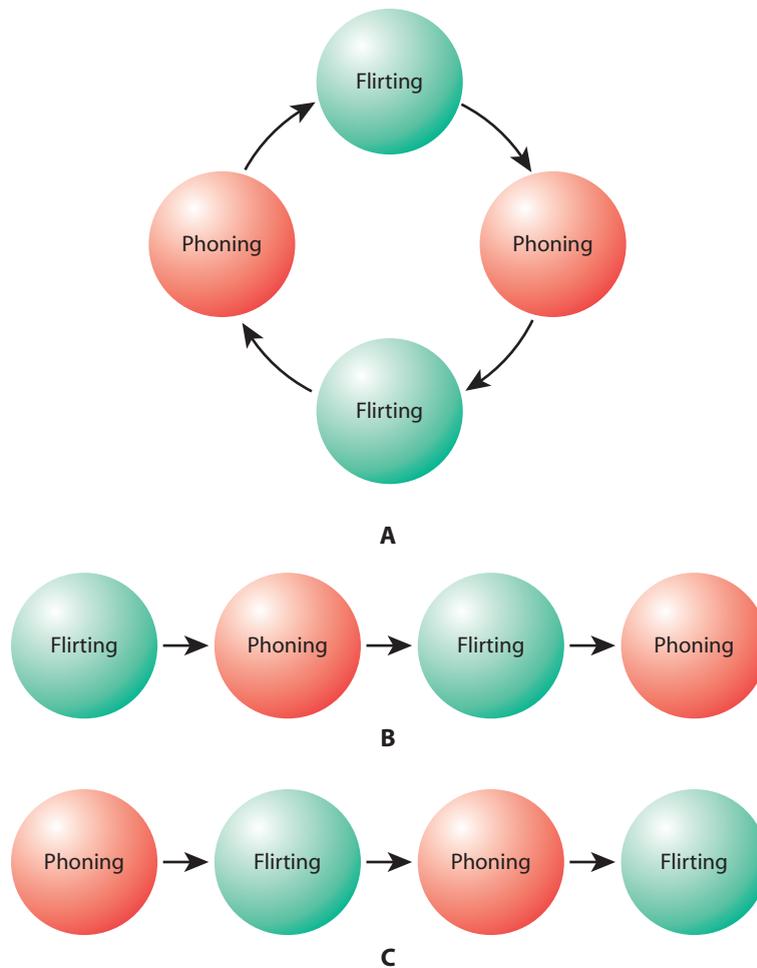
Interpersonal interactions are continuous transactions. There’s no clear-cut beginning or ending. As a participant in or an observer of the communication act, you engage in punctuation: You divide up this continuous, circular process into causes and effects, or **stimuli** and **responses**. That is, you segment this continuous stream of communication into smaller pieces. You label some of these pieces causes, or stimuli, and others effects, or responses.

Consider an example. A married couple is in a restaurant. The husband is flirting with another woman, and the wife is talking to her sister on her cell phone. Both are scowling at each other and are obviously in a deep nonverbal argument. Recalling the situation later, the husband might observe that the wife talked on the phone, so he innocently flirted with the other woman. The only reason for his behavior (he says) was his anger over her talking on the phone when they were supposed to be having dinner together. Notice that he sees his behavior as a response to her behavior. In recalling the same incident, the wife might say that she phoned her sister when he started flirting. The more he flirted, the longer she talked. She had no intention of calling anyone until he started flirting. To her, his behavior was the stimulus and hers was the response; he caused her behavior. Thus, the husband sees the sequence as going from phoning to flirting, and the wife sees it as going from flirting to phoning. This example is depicted visually in Figure 1.5 and is supported by research showing that, among marrieds at least, the individuals regularly see their partner’s behavior as the cause of conflict (Schutz, 1999).

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

How to Disambiguate

You’ve gone out with someone for several months and want to reduce ambiguity about the future of the relationship and discover your partner’s level of commitment. But you don’t want to scare your partner. What are some things you can say or do to find answers to your very legitimate questions?

**FIGURE 1.5****Punctuation and the Sequence of Events**

Try using this three-part figure, discussed in the text, to explain what might go on in the following situation: One person complains about another person's nagging, and the nagging person complains about the other person's avoidance and silence.

This tendency to divide up the various communication transactions in sequences of stimuli and responses is referred to as **punctuation of communication** (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). People punctuate the continuous sequences of events into stimuli and responses for ease of understanding and remembering. And, as both the preceding examples illustrate, people punctuate communication in ways that allow them to look good and that are consistent with their own self-image.

Interpersonal Communication Is Inevitable, Irreversible, and Unrepeatable

Three characteristics often considered together are interpersonal communication's *inevitability*, *irreversibility*, and *unrepeatability*.

COMMUNICATION IS INEVITABLE Often communication is intentional, purposeful, and consciously motivated. Sometimes, however, you are communicating even though you may not think you are or may not even want to. Take, for example, the student sitting

in the back of the room with an “expressionless” face, perhaps staring out the window. The student may think that she or he is not communicating with the teacher or with the other students. On closer inspection, however, you can see that the student *is* communicating something—perhaps lack of interest or simply anxiety about a private problem. In any event, the student is communicating whether she or he wishes to or not—demonstrating the principle of **inevitability**. Similarly, the color and type of your cell phone, the wallpaper in your room, and the type and power of your computer or cell phone communicate messages about you. You cannot *not* communicate. In the same way, you cannot *not* influence the person with whom you interact (Watzlawick, 1978). Persuasion, like communication, is also inevitable. The issue, then, is not whether you will or will not persuade or influence another; rather, it’s how you’ll exert your influence.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

The Irreversibility of Interpersonal Communication

You refer to your best friend’s current romantic partner with the name of the ex-partner. From both their expressions, you can tell your friend never mentioned the ex. What can you say to get your friend out of the trouble you just created? To whom (primarily) would you address your explanation?

COMMUNICATION IS IRREVERSIBLE Notice that only some processes can be reversed. For example, you can turn water into ice and then reverse the process by turning the ice back into water. Other processes, however, are irreversible. You can, for example, turn grapes into wine, but you cannot reverse the process and turn wine into grapes. Interpersonal communication is an irreversible process. Although you may try to qualify, deny, or somehow reduce the effects of your message, you cannot withdraw the message you have conveyed. Similarly, once you press the send key, your e-mail is in cyberspace and impossible to reverse. Because of **irreversibility**, be careful not to say things you may wish to withdraw later.

In online communication, the messages are written and may be saved, stored, and printed. Both face-to-face and online messages may be kept confidential or revealed publicly. But computer messages can be made public more easily and spread more quickly than face-to-face messages. Interestingly enough, only 55 percent of online teens say they do not post content that might reflect negatively on them in the future (Lenhart et al., 2011). And, increasingly, employers and even some colleges are asking that candidates open their social networking accounts during the interview (Raby, 2012).

Because electronic communication often is permanent, you may wish to be cautious when you’re e-mailing, posting your profile, or posting a message. Specifically:

- E-messages are virtually impossible to destroy. Often e-messages that you think you deleted will remain on servers and workstations and may be retrieved by a clever hacker or simply copied and distributed.
- E-messages can easily be made public. Your words, photos, and videos on your blog or on a social networking site can be sent to anyone.
- E-messages are not privileged communication and can easily be accessed by others and be used against you. And you’ll not be able to deny saying something; it will be there in black and white.

Remember, too, that even when you restrict your information to one group or “circle of friends,” you can never be sure that a person you intended to receive the message won’t pass it on to someone you’d prefer to exclude from a particular post or photo.

COMMUNICATION IS UNREPEATABLE The reason why communication is unrepeatable is simple: Everyone and everything are constantly changing. As a result, you never can recapture the exact same situation, frame of mind, or relationship dynamics that defined a previous interpersonal act. For example, you never can repeat meeting someone for the first time, comforting a grieving friend, or resolving a specific conflict.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Getting Out of a Tight Spot

You write a gossipy e-mail about Ellen (revealing things that you promised to keep secret) to your mutual friend Ella but inadvertently send it to Ellen herself. What are some of the things you can say that might help you get out of this awkward situation?

You can, of course, try again; you can say, “I’m sorry I came off so pushy, can we try again?” Notice, however, that even when you say this, you have not erased the initial (and perhaps negative) impression. Instead, you try to counteract this impression by going through the motions again. In doing so, you hope to create a more positive impact that will lessen the original negative effect.



Can you explain and give examples of each of the principles governing interpersonal communication (it is purposeful, occurs in packages of signals, contains content and relationship messages, is a process of adjustment, involves power, is often ambiguous, is punctuated, and is inevitable, irreversible, and unrepeatable)?



Explore the **Concept**
“Perceived Communication
Competence Questionnaire”
at **MyCommunicationLab**

INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE

Your ability to communicate effectively is your **interpersonal competence** (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). A major goal of this text (and of your course) is to expand and enlarge your competence so you’ll have a greater arsenal of communication options at your disposal. The greater your interpersonal competence, the more options you’ll have for communicating with friends, lovers, and family; with colleagues on the job; and in just about any situation in which you’ll communicate with another person. The greater your competence, the greater your own power to accomplish successfully what you want to accomplish—to ask for a raise or a date; establish temporary work relationships, long-term friendships, or romantic relationships; communicate empathy and support; or gain compliance or resist the compliance tactics of others.

In short, interpersonal competence includes knowing how interpersonal communication works and how to best achieve your purposes by adjusting your messages according to the context of the interaction, the person with whom you’re interacting, and a host of other factors discussed throughout this text. Let’s spell out more clearly the traits of a competent interpersonal communicator.

The Competent Interpersonal Communicator Thinks Critically and Mindfully

Without critical thinking, there can be no competent exchange of ideas. Critical thinking is logical thinking; it’s thinking that is well reasoned, unbiased, and clear. It involves thinking intelligently, carefully, and with as much clarity as possible. It’s the opposite of what you’d call sloppy, illogical, or careless thinking. And, not surprisingly, according to one study of corporate executives, critical thinking is one of the stepping stones to effective management (Miller, 1997).

A special kind of critical thinking is mindfulness. **Mindfulness** is a state of awareness in which you’re conscious of your reasons for thinking or behaving. In its opposite, **mindlessness**, you lack conscious awareness



VIEWPOINTS Interpersonal competence

What characters in television sitcoms or dramas do you think demonstrate superior interpersonal competence? What characters demonstrate obvious interpersonal incompetence?

of what or how you're thinking (Langer, 1989). To apply interpersonal skills effectively in conversation, you need to be mindful of the unique communication situation you're in, of your available communication options, and of the reasons why one option is likely to be better than the others (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000; Elmes & Gemmill, 1990).

To increase mindfulness, try the following suggestions (Langer, 1989).

- *Create and re-create categories.* Group things in different ways; remember that people are constantly changing, so the categories into which you may group them also should change. Learn to see objects, events, and people as belonging to a wide variety of categories. Try to see, for example, your prospective romantic partner in a variety of roles—child, parent, employee, neighbor, friend, financial contributor, and so on.
- *Be open to new information and points of view,* even when these contradict your most firmly held beliefs. New information forces you to reconsider what might be outmoded ways of thinking and can help you challenge long-held but now inappropriate beliefs and attitudes.
- *Beware of relying too heavily on first impressions* (Chanowitz & Langer, 1981; Langer, 1989). Treat first impressions as tentative, as hypotheses that need further investigation. Be prepared to revise, reject, or accept these initial impressions.
- *Think before you act.* Especially in delicate situations such as anger or commitment messages, it's wise to pause and think over the situation mindfully (DeVito, 2003). In this way, you'll stand a better chance of acting and reacting appropriately.

INTERPERSONAL CHOICE POINT

Questionable Posts

Your friend has been posting some rather extreme socio-political statements that you think might turn out to be detrimental when searching for a graduate school or job. You've always been honest with each other but careful because you're both very sensitive to criticism. What are some ways you can bring up this topic without seeming critical?

The Competent Interpersonal Communicator Is Skillful

This text explains the theory and research in interpersonal communication in order to provide you with a solid understanding of how interpersonal communication works. With that understanding as a firm foundation, you'll be better able to develop and master the very practical skills of interpersonal communication, including those of empathy, power and influence, listening, politeness, using verbal and nonverbal messages, managing interpersonal conflict, and establishing and maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships.

In learning the skills of interpersonal communication (or any set of skills), you'll probably at first sense an awkwardness and self-consciousness; the new behaviors may not seem to fit comfortably. As you develop more understanding and use the skills more, this awkwardness will gradually fade, and the new behaviors will begin to feel comfortable and natural. You'll facilitate your progress toward mastery if you follow a logical system of steps. Here's one possible system, called STEP (Skill, Theory, Example, Practice):

1. Get a clear understanding of what the *skill* is.
2. Understand the *theory*; if you understand the reasons for the suggestions offered, it will help make the skill more logical and easier to remember.
3. Develop *examples*, especially your own; this will help to make the material covered here a more integral part of communication behavior.
4. *Practice* with the Skill Building Exercises included in this text as well as with those on the website (www.MyCommunicationLab.com). Practice alone at first, then with supportive friends, and then in general day-to-day interactions.

Blog Post

Social Media

See "Social Media Warnings" and "Social Networking and Getting a Job" at tcbdevito.blogspot.com for some added insights into the dangers of posting inappropriate photos and messages on your social media site. Do you think this concern is warranted? Overblown?



SKILL BUILDING EXERCISE

Assessing Your Social Network Profile

Examine your own social network profile (or that of a friend) in terms of the principles of interpersonal communication discussed in this chapter:

1. What purposes does your profile serve? In what ways might it serve the five purposes of interpersonal communication identified here (to learn, relate, influence, play, and help)?
2. In what way is your profile page a package of signals? In what ways do the varied words and pictures combine to communicate meaning?
3. Can you identify and distinguish between content from relational messages?
4. In what ways, if any, have you adjusted your profile as a response to the ways in which others have fashioned their profiles?
5. In what ways does your profile exhibit interpersonal power? In what ways, if any, have you incorporated
6. What messages on your profile are ambiguous? Bumper stickers and photos should provide a useful starting point.
7. In what ways (if any) can you identify the process of punctuation?
8. What are the implications of inevitability, irreversibility, and unrepeatability for publishing a profile on and communicating via social network sites?

Heightened awareness of how messages help create meanings should increase your ability to make more reasoned and reasonable choices in your interpersonal interactions.

The Competent Interpersonal Communicator Is Culturally Aware and Sensitive

The term **culture** refers to the lifestyle of a group of people. A group's culture consists of its values, beliefs, artifacts, ways of behaving, and ways of communicating. Culture includes all that members of a social group have produced and developed—their language, ways of thinking, art, laws, and religion. Culture is transmitted from one generation to another not through genes but through communication and learning, especially through the teachings of parents, peer groups, schools, religious institutions, and government agencies. Because most cultures teach women and men different attitudes and ways of communicating, many of the gender differences we observe may be considered cultural. So, while not minimizing the biological differences between men and women, most people agree that gender differences are, in part, cultural.

Competence is sometimes culture specific; communications that prove effective in one culture will not necessarily prove effective in another. For example, giving a birthday gift to a close friend would be appreciated by members of many cultures and in some cases would be expected. But Jehovah's Witnesses frown on this practice because they don't celebrate birthdays (Dresser, 1999, 2005). Because of the vast range of cultural differences that affect interpersonal communication, every chapter discusses the role of culture, and Chapter 2 focuses exclusively on culture and intercultural communication.

The Competent Interpersonal Communicator Is Ethical

Interpersonal communication also involves questions of **ethics**, the study of good and bad, of right and wrong, of moral and immoral. Ethics is concerned with actions, with behaviors; it's concerned with distinguishing between behaviors that are moral (ethical, good, and right) and those that are immoral (unethical, bad, and wrong). Not surprisingly, there's an ethical dimension to any interpersonal communication act (Bok, 1978; Neher & Sandin, 2007). In thinking about ethics, it's useful to distinguish between an objective and a subjective view of ethics.



Explore the **Exercise**
"Ethics in Interpersonal
Communication" at
MyCommunicationLab

If you take an **objective view** of ethics, you'd argue that the rightness or wrongness of an act is absolute and exists apart from the values or beliefs of any individual or culture. With this view, you'd hold that there are standards that apply to all people in all situations at all times. If lying, false advertising, using illegally obtained evidence, or revealing secrets you've promised to keep were considered unethical, then they would be unethical regardless of circumstances or of cultural values and beliefs. In an objective view, the end can never justify the means; an unethical act is never justified regardless of how good or beneficial its results (or ends) might be.

If you take a **subjective view**, you'd claim that the morality of an act depends on a specific culture's values and beliefs as well as on the particular circumstances. Thus, from a subjective position, you would claim that the end might justify the means—a good result can justify the use of unethical means to achieve that result. For example, you'd argue that lying is wrong to win votes or to sell cigarettes but that lying can be ethical if the end result is positive (such as trying to make someone who is unattractive feel better by telling them they look great or telling a critically ill person that they'll feel better soon).

Each field of study defines what is and what is not ethical to its concerns. Here are just a few to highlight some communication-oriented codes. In this connection, try looking up the code of ethics for the profession you're in or planning on entering.

- The National Communication Association Ethical Credo
- Blogger's Ethics
- Online Journalism
- Radio-Television News Directors Association and Foundation Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

In addition to this introductory discussion, ethical dimensions of interpersonal communication are presented in each of the remaining chapters in “Ethical Messages” boxes. Here, as a kind of preview, are just a few of the ethical issues raised in these boxes. As you read these questions, think about your own ethical beliefs and how these beliefs influence the way you'd answer the questions.

- What are your ethical obligations as a listener? See Ethics box, Chapter 4.
- When is it unethical to remain silent? See Ethics box, Chapter 6.
- When is gossiping ethical, and when is it unethical? See Ethics box, Chapter 8.
- At what point in a relationship do you have an obligation to reveal intimate details of your life? See Ethics box, Chapter 9.
- Are there ethical and unethical ways to engage in conflict and conflict resolution? See Ethics box, Chapter 11.



Can you define and illustrate the four interpersonal competencies (mindful and critical thinking, an arsenal of interpersonal skills, an awareness of cultural differences and sensitivity to them, and an ethical foundation)?

Blog Post

Ethics

For a self-test, along with one interpretation of popular ethical guidelines, see “ABCD: Ethics” at tcbdevito.blogspot.com.

Add your own comments.



MESSAGES IN THE MEDIA: WRAP UP



The plots of many sitcoms often revolve around problems in interpersonal communication. Watching such shows with a view to the principles of effective and ineffective interpersonal communication will provide a wide variety of specific examples.

SUMMARY OF CONCEPTS AND SKILLS

 Listen to the **Audio Chapter Summary** at **MyCommunicationLab**

This chapter explored the reasons for studying interpersonal communication, its nature, its essential elements, several principles of interpersonal communication, and interpersonal competence.

Why Study Interpersonal Communication

1. It's an essential and inevitable part of human experience as well as having numerous personal and professional benefits.

The Nature of Interpersonal Communication

2. Interpersonal communication refers to a type of communication that occurs between interdependent individuals, is inherently relational, exists on a continuum, involves both verbal and nonverbal messages, exists in varied forms, and is best viewed as a transactional process involving choices.

The Elements of Interpersonal Communication

3. Essential to an understanding of interpersonal communication are the following elements: source–receiver, encoding–decoding, messages (including metamessages, feedback, and feedforward), channel, noise (physical, physiological, psychological, and semantic), and context (physical, social–psychological, temporal, and cultural).

Principles of Interpersonal Communication

4. Interpersonal communication is:
 - purposeful; through interpersonal communication we learn, relate, influence, play, and help.
 - a package of signals that usually reinforce but also may contradict one another.
 - a combination of content and relationship messages; we communicate about objects and events in the world but also about relationships between sources and receivers.
 - a process of adjustment in which each of us accommodates to the specialized communication system of the other.
 - integrally connected with power.
 - ambiguous to some extent.
 - punctuated (divided up into stimuli and responses) by observers.
 - inevitable (communication will occur whether we want it to or not), irreversible (once something is received, it remains communicated and cannot be erased from a listener's memory), and unrepeatable (no communication act can ever be repeated exactly).



Study and **Review** materials for this chapter are at **MyCommunicationLab**

Interpersonal Competence

5. Interpersonal competence is best viewed as consisting of both a knowledge of and skill in interpersonal communication, an understanding and control of power strategies, effective listening, critical thinking and mindfulness, cultural understanding, politeness, and ethics.

In addition to the above concepts, this chapter also covered several interpersonal skills. As you read over the list, place a check in front of those you feel you'd like to work on:

- ___ 1. *Feedback*. Listen to both verbal and nonverbal feedback—from yourself and from others—and use these cues to help you adjust your messages.
- ___ 2. *Feedforward*. Use feedforward when you feel your listener needs background or when you want to ease into a particular topic, such as bad news.
- ___ 3. *Channel*. Assess your channel options (for example, face-to-face conversation versus e-mail or voicemail message) before communicating important messages.
- ___ 4. *Noise management*. Reduce physical, physiological, psychological, and semantic noise as best you can; use repetition and restatement and, when in doubt, ask if you're clear.
- ___ 5. *Mindfulness*. Create and re-create categories, be open to new information and points of view, avoid relying too heavily on first impressions, and think before you act.
- ___ 6. *Purposes*. Adjust your interpersonal communication strategies on the basis of your specific purpose.
- ___ 7. *Packaging*. Make your verbal and nonverbal messages consistent; inconsistencies often create uncertainty and misunderstanding.
- ___ 8. *Content and relationship*. Listen to both the content and the relationship aspects of messages, distinguish between them, and respond to both.
- ___ 9. *Context adjustment*. Adjust your messages to the physical, cultural, social–psychological, and temporal context.
- ___ 10. *Communication options*. Assess your communication options before communicating, in light of inevitability, irreversibility, and unrepeatability.

VOCABULARY QUIZ: The Language of Interpersonal Communication

Match the terms of interpersonal communication with their definitions. Record the number of the definition next to the appropriate term.

- ___ interpersonal communication (3)
 - ___ interpersonal competence (22)
 - ___ feedback (10)
 - ___ ambiguity (18)
 - ___ cultural context (13)
 - ___ feedforward (11)
 - ___ relationship messages (15)
 - ___ source–receiver (9)
 - ___ encoding (9)
 - ___ communication as a transactional process (7)
1. Messages sent back to the source in response to the source's messages.
 2. Each person in the interpersonal communication act.

3. Information about messages that are yet to be sent.
4. Presence of more than one potential meaning.
5. The rules and norms, beliefs and attitudes of the people communicating.
6. Communication as an ongoing process in which each part depends on each other part.
7. Communication that takes place between persons who have a relationship.
8. Messages referring to the connection between the two people communicating.
9. The understanding of and ability to use the skills of interpersonal communication.
10. The process of sending messages; for example, in speaking or writing.

These ten terms and additional terms used in this chapter can be found in the glossary.



MyCommunicationLab

Visit MyCommunicationLab for a wealth of additional information on interpersonal communication. Flashcards, videos, skill building exercises, sample test questions, and additional exercises, examples, and discussions will help you continue your study of the fundamentals of interpersonal communication, its theory, and its skills.