

1 The Communication Process

Impersonal and Interpersonal

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Communication is a complex, ongoing process that brings us into contact with the people in our world. Often communication is viewed as a straightforward exchange of messages between a speaker and a listener, but this is a naïve view. As indicated in this chapter, communication is a symbolic process of sharing meanings.

A key to interpreting communication is to find the meanings of messages, and those meanings are found in people, not in words. Your friend's meaning of trust or happiness may be quite different than yours. Even a presumably simple, concrete word can cause misunderstandings. You may think of vacation as personal time spent away from the workplace with no thought of your job. Your boss may think vacation implies that employees will be away from the office but continuously available to discuss work-related problems via cell phone or e-mail. The closer both meanings are, the easier it is for you to communicate effectively.

Communication is a continuous process that begins with a first encounter between people and does not end until the last encounter in their lives. These encounters may involve functional messages that serve practical purposes, or, in cases of close ties, the encounters may also involve nurturing messages that convey a sense of caring and personal connection. Over time, members of a relationship develop increasingly predictable communica-

tion patterns and, if they become close, create a relational culture or similar worldview.

In the following pages, Galvin and Wilkinson address this complex issue, discussing the communication process as a constant symbolic interaction of sharing, exchanging, and coordinating meanings. Through various examples, they apply this understanding of the communication process to explain the difference between specific types of communication, like interpersonal, impersonal, functional, and nurturing communication. Finally, they explore relational culture, a very specific and unique type of interpersonal communication, and discuss the communication dynamics involved. The analysis in this chapter answers the question "How does communication work?" and establishes a basis of knowledge that prepares the reader for the chapters to follow. As you read this chapter, begin to formulate your answer to the question: What is communication?

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How often have you heard someone say, "We just can't communicate," or "We are having communication problems"? These expressions appear regularly in everyday conversations as people struggle to solve a problem, start a relationship, manage a conflict, or find a new way of connecting in an established relationship. Such struggles occur in all areas of life, in classrooms and offices, at kitchen tables, and on athletic fields. In our society people of different backgrounds come together to solve problems or make things happen, and in those situations they can find themselves frustrated because of "communication breakdowns." Although these dissatisfactions are not new, they are heightened by the fact that we live in an information age in which effective communication is expected and valued in all areas of life.

Over time we have had the opportunity to listen to many different people discuss their interpersonal frustrations as we lead communication workshops for family members, organizational employees, and community groups. In all these cases participants are invested in improving their handling of certain situations, in analyzing their relationships, and in developing new relational skills.

As we discuss interpersonal communication in our workshops, we also describe the communication process and its elements as well as the specific characteristics of *interpersonal* communication that distinguish it from *impersonal* communication. We also address the concept of relational culture, or the development of a highly unique interpersonal relationship characterized by a unique system of meanings created and maintained by the partners. Our hope is to encourage participants to develop their knowledge and skills in relationship development and relationship maintenance in various contexts. We will introduce these issues in the following pages.

The Communication Process

Whenever we ask workshop participants how they would define *communication*, we hear responses such as “transmitting ideas,” “talking and listening,” or “sending messages using words and movements.” Each person has some notion of what it means to communicate with another and knows how it feels when communication attempts are successful or unsuccessful, yet they have not thought deeply about the communication process itself. People seem to assume that communication works or it does not work, more as a matter of fate than as a process that can be changed or improved.

Because communication itself is so complex, we could list multiple elaborate and highly technical definitions of it. For our purposes, however, a simple phrase is an appropriate starting point. As we view it, communication is *the symbolic process of sharing meanings*. Because this definition is almost deceptively simple, each of these key words needs to be developed.

Symbolic

By saying that communication is symbolic, we mean that symbols are used to transmit messages. Symbols are representations of a person, event, place, or object. Words, or verbal expressions, are the most commonly understood symbols, but symbolic actions also include the whole range of nonverbal behaviors: facial expressions, vocal tone, eye con-

tact, gestures, movement, body posture, appearance, context, and spatial distance. In addition, objects and ideas can be used as symbols. For example, friends often exchange gifts, food, or e-mails as symbols of connectedness.

You have learned to use verbal and nonverbal symbols both as a message creator and as a message interpreter. As a speaker (or sender), you create messages by selecting the most appropriate symbols from a range of options in order to reach your intended receivers most effectively. As a listener (or receiver), you attempt to interpret the symbols others convey to you. Although exchanging appropriate symbols appears rather simple and straightforward, we are constantly amazed at the communication breakdowns that occur as symbols are misinterpreted.

Effective communicators are those who are able to select the most appropriate symbols or messages for specific other persons and who are able to interpret the intended message symbols of other speakers. As a child you learned to encode one type of message to ask your father for money and another to request a loan from your best friend. You learned to interpret your brother’s gestures indicating if he is feeling sad, worried, or exhausted. You have learned who will be enraged if you roll your eyes at them, and who will decode your nonverbal cue as humorous. For effective communication to occur, the speaker and listener must share the same meanings for the symbolic messages they exchange.

Process

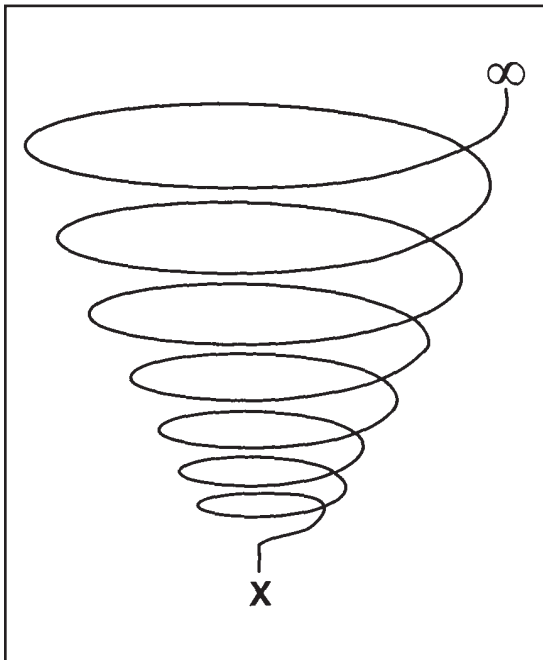
Relational communication involves a process, a dynamic and continuous process.

Each relationship develops its own communication history, a history that cannot be rewritten. Someone once said, “It’s unfortunate you only get one chance to make a first impression.” A relationship’s communication pattern begins at the first moment of contact—at a party, in a classroom, in a meeting. The relationship may start in any number of ways: a question, a glance, an introduction, or a smile. Once contact is made, the relationship begins to develop its history, which is constructed and reflected by its communication patterns. A relationship’s ongoing devel-

opment may be interrupted by physical or psychological distance; relational partners may move in and out of each others' lives over many years, but the history of the relationship continues from that first meeting. Sometimes people say they wish to wipe out a time period of their relationship or forget a painful argument that occurred. Individuals may choose to emphasize or deemphasize certain communication events throughout their relationship history, but they can never go back to "how things used to be," or delete a piece of that history.

Although some models of the communication process portray it as a circular process, our preferred model for understanding this process comes from the thinking of Frank Dance (Dance and Larson 1976; Dance and Zak-Dance 1986), who proposed a helical representation. Imagine the form of a helix, in which the continuousness of the process is represented by the infinity sign (Figure 1-1). This model depicts the ever-widening scope of the relationships as participants continuously reencounter each other, a process that continues indefinitely.

Figure 1-1



Whereas a circular model suggests that communication returns to the same place, the helical model implies the ever-changing, progressive, and evolving nature of relational interactions. The helix representation provides support for the concept that "you can't put a relationship into reverse and erase a difficult period of time." We have stopped counting the times workshop participants say, "If only things could go back to the way they were two years ago," or, "I want to wipe out the last six months of our marriage." In reality each encounter has inalterably added to their relationship, and this history cannot be denied. People in relationships cannot wipe out a huge hurtful fight, long periods of verbal aggression or silence, or, in romantic situations, the affair. Yet most friends, partners or colleagues can learn to manage their history in effective ways: through emphasizing positives, talking through the conflicts, and behaving in ways that affirm their ties.

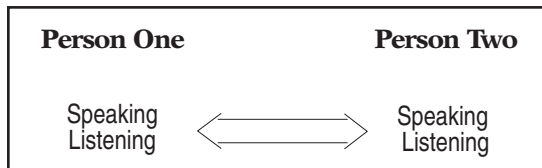
A conflictual father and son cannot pretend they never hurt one another with words or fists; friends cannot erase sarcastic comments. All they can do is work through the issues that currently keep them from dealing with each other in constructive or caring ways, and attempt to change their present communication patterns as they continue in their relational process. People can always *choose* to change, to do things differently. Such choices represent one of the most exciting parts of the relational development process.

Sharing

Even though the words *speaker* and *listener* are commonly used in communication terminology, communication is not a process of trading messages. It does not resemble a poor tennis match in which one Player A hits the ball and then just stands there until the Player B hits the return. Symbolic messages do not travel from Person One to Person Two and back to Person One again in some turn-taking ritual. Rather, at its most basic level, communication requires mutual and continuous involvement, sometimes referred to as *the transactional nature of communication*. This mutual influence process is similar to a skilled tennis match in which both players are always in motion based on what they antici-

pate the other will do. Similarly, in communication encounters both parties remain actively involved in the process. For example, even though Michael may appear more talkative, Vanessa conveys nonverbally that she is bored or pleased or annoyed, thus influencing Michael's choice of future message symbols. Both are actively and continuously involved in every moment of the interactions; thus, the mutual influence process that characterizes interpersonal interaction. Diagrammed, the transactional nature of communication looks like Figure 1-2.

Figure 1-2



As relationships develop over time, the transactional process becomes more complex. Your perception of another person and that individual's perception of you combine to form a context for your interactions. If you see Person X as warm and supportive, you will relate to him or her in an open manner. Person X is then likely to see you as open and friendly and relate to you with increasing warmth or support. Thus, your perceptions of each other affect each interaction as well as the overall perception of the relationship. The situation can also be reversed, creating a negative context. If you see another person as judgmental or sarcastic, this may lead you to interact in a defensive or combative manner. You may be caught up in a type of negative spiral. Each communication exchange occurs within the context of a mutually constructed relationship.

If the definition of a relationship remains relatively unchanged, for example boss and employee, romantic partners, and parent and child, the nature of the communication process becomes fixed. Each new encounter reinforces the good or the bad. A boss who constantly relates to staff members as incompetent may stifle their attempts to be innovative. A parent who treats children as responsible persons fosters their ability to

handle new situations. This process is captured in the statement "Over time we create an image of another person and relate to the image we create." Individuals construct a reality of themselves and of others through their interactions, and relate to those realities they constructed. The attempt to understand and adapt to another represents a communication challenge.

Meanings

Although verbal and nonverbal symbols permit us to transmit thoughts and feelings, the symbols must be mutually understood for the meanings to be truly shared. *Common meanings make it possible for us to communicate.* Since there is no absolute standard for all symbols, we are constantly trying to connect with people, even our family members, who do not share exactly the same meanings for the symbols that we use. Therefore it is important to remember the expression "Words don't mean; people do."

Each person's background, including physiological state, family and cultural background, and unique experiences, influences how he or she perceives the world and attaches meanings to symbols. The experience of being nearsighted, athletic, extraverted, dyslexic, artistic, or shy affects how you perceive the world and relate to others. Your family of origin (the family or families in which you were raised) served as your first communication classroom, teaching you how to interpret messages and how to use communication to manage key relational issues such as intimacy and conflict. In addition, your cultural background, socioeconomic level, and educational experiences influence your perceptions. Based on your culture, you may interpret big hugs, multiple-course meals, and shouting voices as symbols of caring. If you grew up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood, you will have different meanings for money and security than someone who grew up in an affluent community.

Finally, your own unique circumstances influence how you assign meanings. A painful custody battle affects how you discuss divorce. Early school experiences influence how you participate in college classes. Liv-

ing abroad affects how willing you are to interact with people of different cultures.

Fortunately, most people report many similar experiences, but no two people develop the same set of meanings. Each is a unique entity with particular meanings for certain symbols. Ninety dollars may represent a *large* purchase to one person, but her partner assumes that only purchases above \$500 are *large*. A nickname may seem funny to you and insulting to your friend. Screaming may be viewed as an acceptable or terrible way to resolve conflicts. Breakdowns in communication often occur because of missed meanings. Only with knowledge and empathy can you walk in someone else's shoes, experience the world from a different perspective, and create messages that reflect that point of view.

Frequently, focus is placed on the words rather than on the entire range of verbal and nonverbal symbols that are constantly being used to create and interpret the meanings of messages. Therefore, at any point in time each person involved in communication is contributing to the process—and experiencing the transactional nature of the communication process. Effective communication requires the psychological presence of both parties—attention and connectedness are indicators that both parties are focused on the encounter.

We find the following simple exercise very useful for demonstrating how individuals may differ in translating the meaning of everyday terms. Imagine yourself saying these phrases to a particular person. Think about exactly what you would hope that other person would do if you said these words to him or her.

I need more *respect* from you.

I feel there is a lack of *trust* in our relationship.

Each of the italicized words receives many different responses. Depending on the person responding, more *respect* may be indicated by (1) listening to me, (2) asking for my opinion, or (3) following my advice. *Trust* may be indicated by (1) keeping what I say confidential, (2) telling me your real feelings, or (3) telling

me when a painful event happens. These are only examples of the many meanings that people have for the two common terms *respect* and *trust*. Shared meanings are critical because they help to create the context for a relationship in which participants learn to predict how the other will react to particular verbal and nonverbal messages.

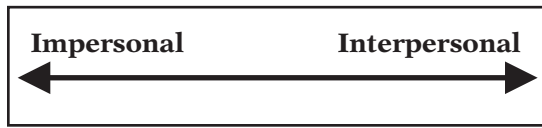
Interpersonal Communication

Not all communication should be considered interpersonal communication. Frequently, you are engaged in impersonal interactions. When you ask for directions, pay for a purchase, or call for a doctor's appointment, you are not automatically involved in interpersonal communication. If you ask a teacher for clarification, discuss a project with a boss, or plan a family reunion with a distant cousin, you may be involved in necessary, functional interactions but you do not share a strong, significant relationship.

Interpersonal communication occurs when two or more people engage in voluntary, ongoing, interdependent interactions that involve meaningful interpretation of their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. In short, this implies a perception of the relationship as positive, reflecting a choice to continue to relate to each other over time in order to deepen the relationship and make it increasingly unique. There may be exceptions to this description, such as when you interact involuntarily with particular teachers or managers for a long period of time, learn how to communicate effectively with them, and eventually develop a voluntary interpersonal relationship. In the case of involuntary but required relationships, it is likely that the person with the less power is adapting to the person with greater power, setting up a one-up/one-down interaction pattern. Such relationships tend to remain impersonal, although, on occasion, these persons develop a friendship.

Relationships move from impersonal to increasingly personal as closeness develops. Therefore, you need to think about relationships on a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal, understanding that a particular relationship may move forward and backward at different times.

Figure 1-3



Patterns

In ongoing relationships, communication becomes patterned and predictable. As you relate with another person, you begin to create increasingly predictable interaction patterns. The more intense and personal the relationship becomes, the more unique the relational patterns. Relational patterns involve verbal and nonverbal communication acts that are (1) recurring and (2) relationship defining. Over time, while people in a relationship develop their own ways of interacting, they evoke certain responses from each other and play off them. For example, you may know that you and Tony will joke around when you see each other, whereas you and Alberto will talk about poker. You may share your romantic problems with Sarah but never with Gail, who you know equally well. Observing an ongoing significant relationship, you may see a remarkably complex pattern, similar to a dance, emerge. For example:

X makes a statement; Y answers with a complaint.

X responds with a kidding remark; Y counters with sarcasm.

X retorts angrily; Y suggests talking is useless.

One or the other stomps away.

In his book *Couplehood* (1994, 202), Paul Reiser describes numerous examples of everyday patterns between partners.

Like all businesses, couples engage in endless meetings to discuss areas of management concern and division of labor.

“You know, we really should call the post office and tell them to hold our mail while we’re away.”

“We? You mean *me*, don’t you?”

“No, I mean *we*. I didn’t say ‘*you*.’ I said ‘*we*.’ You *or* me.”

“Oh, really? Are *you* going to ever call the post office?”

A moment to think. “No.”

“Then you mean ‘*me*,’ don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

As in many other areas of life, relationships become predictable; these patterns tend to create or constitute the relationship.

Functional and Nurturing Communication

In many relationships, the bulk of everyday communication tends to be functional rather than nurturing. *Functional communication* involves managing day-to-day necessities and exchanging impersonal information such as getting plans coordinated, meals fixed, schedules arranged, and group projects finished—all the details that keep life running smoothly. We estimate that 90 percent of the communication that goes on between friends or colleagues, parents and children, and even spouses or partners tends to be functional communication. If the only communication between closely connected persons is functional, that relationship is severely limited. If the necessary and desirable functional interactions are not accompanied by communication that is *more personal*, distance will characterize their ties, limiting their relationship.

Nurturing communication occurs when participants send messages that are caretaking of the relationship—messages that indicate that the other person and the relationship are valued. Such nurturing communication may include a hug, a special birthday celebration, a thinking-of-you phone call or IM, a deep conversation about feelings, or a direct personal statement such as “I’m glad we’re friends.” Nurturing communication involves emotional closeness and carries the “I care about you” messages. People who nurture each other confirm the other’s existence—“You are there; I recognize you; I care about you.”

Through our work with partners and families, we have developed an informal guideline that states the following: If there is 10 percent nurturing communication going on in any relationship, that relationship is healthy. When 10 percent of the behaviors in a relationship are nurturing, we believe the people involved will feel cared for and valued. In our experience, when individuals in relationships come for counseling, functional messages account for about 95 percent of their communication and the remaining 5 percent is negative, often openly hostile. Nurturing messages disappeared from their relational life.

Nurturing takes different forms in different relationships, but no matter what the form of expression, everyone needs to experience it. Coworkers, friends, and family members can all be involved in levels of nurturing communication. Individuals who have been nurtured are likely to be good nurturers; those who have not been nurtured can learn to nurture others, but often this takes conscious effort and hard work. Nurturing communication serves as the lifeblood of any relationship. Without it, the relationship remains static and functional; with it, the relationship renews itself through continual growth.

Relational Culture

Persons in strong, highly developed interpersonal relationships eventually create their own relational culture. *Relational culture* describes a jointly constructed worldview, a personally developed set of understandings that affect the attitudes, actions, and identities of the relational partners. Over time many partners or best friends adapt to each other until they experience an evolving, unique set of meanings that are reflected in their relational culture. These private meanings, conveyed verbally and nonverbally, separate the partnership from other relationships; nicknames, joint storytelling, inside jokes, and code words contribute to the creation of a “world built for two.” We find Julia Wood’s description captures the essence of a relational culture: “processes, structures and practices that create, express and sustain personal relationships and the identities of partners” (2000, 77). Commu-

nication patterns serve as the basis for relational cultures as they are constructed, maintained, or changed through communication. A strong relational culture is the hallmark of an intense, intimate interpersonal relationship.

In a world of many stresses and changes, we need our relationships to sustain us and nourish us as human beings. Communication is central to the process of constructing meaningful and fulfilling relational support. The ability to build and nurture such relationships is a critical life skill, one to be learned and valued.

References

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Questions

1. Describe a relationship you have observed that exhibits functional and nurturing messages. Give examples of each.
2. Think about a communication situation in which the symbols used caused misunderstanding. Describe the communication breakdown, and imagine what the communicators might have done to avoid such a breakdown.
3. Think about the communication in a significant relationship in your life according to the helical model. According to this model, you cannot forget or ignore difficult experiences. Describe how you and the other person have managed to deal with painful or conflictual times in your relational history.

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