Communicating
IN SMALL GROUPS

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

TWELFTH EDITION

Steven A. Beebe · John T. Masterson

Communicating in Small Groups

Principles and Practices

Twelfth Edition

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P Pearson

Dedicated to
Sue and Nancy

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Brief Contents

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Preface

From our first edition to this, our twelfth edition, our goal in writing this book has remained the same: to write a book that students find interesting and practical, and that instructors find clear and comprehensive. We are pleased that the previous 11 editions continue to be praised and widely used by both teachers and students and that our text remains a market leader.

We have written the twelfth edition of *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* to serve as the primary text for a college-level course that focuses on group communication. We continue to seek a balanced approach to presenting the latest small group principles informed by classic and contemporary research, while also identifying practical practices that bring those principles to life.

New to the Twelfth Edition

In this new edition, we have thoroughly updated the research that anchors the principles and skills we present, incorporated new pedagogical features to enhance student learning, and added new applications of technology to enhance engagement collaboration. Here's an overview of what's new.

REVEL LEARNING PLATFORM   We are excited to offer instructors and students a Revel version of *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices*. Revel provides students with interactive demonstrations, simulations, and video examples that help bring the topics covered in small group communication courses to life. It embeds these learning tools in a format that presents the text in new and visually engaging ways. Students will also benefit from Revel's abundant opportunities for testing their knowledge and applying it to real-world scenarios.

EXPANDED EMPHASIS ON VIRTUAL COLLABORATION   From the first page of Chapter 1 through the appendices, we have added new research-based information about the role that technology plays in facilitating collaboration in contemporary society. Students who have used technological tools all their lives are becoming increasingly more sophisticated about the use of technology. In this twelfth edition, we have revised our coverage of technology and the use of new media, including the use of avatars and artificial intelligence, to reflect students' existing knowledge about technology while also building on it.

UPDATED EMPHASIS ON GROUP COMMUNICATION SKILLS   Students take a course in group communication not only to improve their knowledge, but also to become more skilled communicators. How to develop a discussion plan, create an agenda, facilitate a meeting, manage conflict, make efficient and effective decisions, lead others, and collaboratively solve problems are just a few of the skill sets that are presented. To help students bolster their communication competence, we have expanded our application of specific group communication skills throughout the book. In addition, we've added new examples and research applications to ensure that students can increase their group communication skill.

EXPANDED AND UPDATED LEARNING OUTCOMES
To help students learn, review, and master the chapter content, we have significantly expanded the number of learning outcomes included in each chapter. These learning outcomes directly correspond to specific chapter headings and sections. Students can easily confirm their mastery of each section of the material by reviewing the chapter objectives.

STREAMLINED CHAPTER CONTENT   Sometimes less is more. To help students quickly grasp ideas and information, we have looked for ways to condense the text's content by using bullets, new subheads, and streamlined prose to assist students' mastery of the material.

UPDATED DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY GROUP COMMUNICATION RESEARCH   As we have for more than 35 years, we've done our best to find the latest research about small group communication and add it to our already comprehensive digest of small group communication research applications. Each chapter includes new and updated references to the latest applications of and insights into communicating in small groups.

AND MUCH, MUCH MORE   Each chapter includes new examples, illustrations, cartoons, and updated pedagogy to make *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* the best learning tool possible. We've made a special effort to streamline our coverage of content to make room for new research and additional pedagogical features so as not to add to the book's overall length.

Content Highlights

Here's a brief summary highlighting several specific changes we've made to the twelfth edition:

Chapter 1: Introducing Group Principles and Practices

- New research conclusions about the impact of social media on group collaboration
- New examples related to virtual collaboration
- New research about the importance of communication to developing effective teams
- Streamlined discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of groups
- Updated coverage of virtual collaboration

Chapter 2: Understanding Small Group Communication Theory

- New, more contemporary case studies
- Streamlined discussion of theory and theory building
- Expanded discussion of communication and technology
- Updated research base and new examples relevant to nontraditional students

Chapter 3: Facilitating Group Development

- Enhanced discussion of technology as it affects group formation
- Updated research base, especially as it relates to virtual groups and culture
- New research on the effects of homogeneity and diversity in group composition
- New research on culture and group formation

Chapter 4: Preparing to Collaborate

- Streamlined coverage of how to develop a discussion plan
- New information about how to gather and analyze information
- New and updated coverage of how to develop a meeting agenda
- New research conclusions about how information is shared during group discussion
- Updated discussion of virtual collaboration

Chapter 5: Relating to Others in Groups

- Expanded treatment of gender, culture, and sexual orientation
- Streamlined discussions throughout for easier student access to key points
- New research on workplace incivility and productivity
- New research and discussion of trust in face-to-face and virtual teams
- Enhanced discussion of technology throughout

Chapter 6: Improving Group Climate

- Updated, more contemporary examples
- New research about cohesiveness in virtual teams
- Streamlined discussion of defensive and supportive communication
- New research and research-based recommendations about building cohesiveness in virtual teams
- Amplified discussion of technology and group climate

Chapter 7: Enhancing Communication Skills in Groups

- Chapter streamlined for easier student access
- Research base updated throughout
- New, more contemporary examples for nontraditional students
- New research and discussion of critical-listening and task-listening styles

Chapter 8: Managing Conflict

- Updated coverage of the role of culture in managing conflict
- New discussion and research about relational conflict in groups
- Streamlined coverage of conflict management styles
- Updated discussion of virtual collaboration and conflict management
- New research about strategies for developing consensus

Chapter 9: Leading Groups

- New, more contemporary examples
- Revised discussion of the Minnesota Studies
- New research on transformational cultures in virtual teams

- New research on leadership and gender
- New research and discussion of shared leadership

Chapter 10: Making Decisions and Solving Problems

- New research about information sharing and group decision making
- Updated coverage of the "risky shift" phenomenon during both virtual and non virtual group discussion
- New research about artificial intelligence and group decision making
- New research about virtual collaboration and group problem solving
- Updated coverage of diversity and group problem solving

Chapter 11: Using Problem-Solving Techniques

- New references to the group development phases—forming, storming, norming, and performing
- New research about strategies and techniques for solving problems
- New applications of research about virtual collaboration and group problem solving
- Streamlined coverage of question-oriented approaches to group problem solving
- Moved Competent Group Communicator assessment instrument to the appendices

Chapter 12: Enhancing Creativity in Groups

- New research about the relationships among intuition, creativity, and group decision making
- New research about the importance of being open and receptive to ideas and group creativity
- New research conclusions about the value of providing ample time for group brainstorming
- New research about strategies for developing a climate of trust and enhanced group creativity
- New research conclusions about the role of avatars in enhancing group creativity

Appendices

- Appendix A, which highlights the principles and practices of effective meetings, has been thoroughly updated.

- Appendix B has been expanded to include current strategies for delivering group presentations.
- The Competent Group Communicator assessment form has been moved to a new Appendix C focusing on assessing small group problem-solving competencies.

Balanced Coverage: Principles and Practices

Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices provides a carefully crafted integration of both principles and practices that provide a strong theoretical scaffolding for the practical "how to" skills needed for communicating in small groups. Theory without application can leave students understanding group principles but not knowing how to enhance their own performance. Conversely, presenting lists of techniques without providing an understanding of the principles that inform their skill would result in a laundry list of do's and don'ts without insight as to when to apply those skills. The balanced tension between theory and application, structure and interaction, and task and process is evident in all communication study, but especially in the dynamic context of a small group. We believe that emphasizing theory without helping students apply principles can result in highly informed, yet under-skilled group members. While our students often clamor for techniques to enhance their skills, such approaches alone do not give students the underlying principles they need to inform their newfound applications.

When we summarize research conclusions, we hear our students' voices echoing in our heads, asking, "So what?" In response to those queries, we ask ourselves how the research conclusions we cite can enhance the quality of collaboration. We seek to provide principles and practices of small group communication that make a real difference in our students' lives.

Both of us abhor boring meetings that seem adrift and pointless. Consequently, we draw upon our 80 years of combined university administrative and teaching experience as we sift through the latest research to keep our focus on application while anchoring our prescriptions in principled theory. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive, yet laser-focused compendium of the latest thinking about group and team communication.

Popular Features We've Retained

A hallmark of this book, according to educators and students, is our get-to-the-point writing style coupled with our comprehensive distillation of contemporary and classic

group communication research. We continue to receive praise for the clear applications of the research we describe. We've done our best to keep the features that instructors and students like best about our book: its lively, engaging writing style; references to the most recent research; and emphasis on not overwhelming readers with unnecessary rambling narratives. As we have in previous editions, we've revised and updated all of our pedagogical features, including chapter objectives, discussion questions, and chapter activities. Case studies and a renewed emphasis on virtual collaboration are continuing features in this new edition.

Revel™

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When students are engaged deeply, they learn more effectively and perform better in their courses. This simple fact inspired the creation of Revel: an immersive learning experience designed for the way today's students read, think, and learn. Built in collaboration with educators and students nationwide, Revel is the newest, fully digital way to deliver respected Pearson content.

Revel enlivens course content with media interactives and assessments—integrated directly within the authors' narrative—that provide opportunities for students to read about and practice course material in tandem. This immersive educational technology boosts student engagement, which leads to better understanding of concepts and improved performance throughout the course.

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Supplemental Resources for Instructors

The following resources are available for instructors. These can be downloaded at http://www.pearsonhighered.com/irc. Login required.

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL AND TEST BANK The Instructor's Manual portion of the IM/TB includes the following resources: sample syllabi for structuring the course; an outline and summary for each chapter that includes the major ideas covered; chapter objectives; discussion questions; and experiential activities. The Test Bank portion of the IM/TB contains multiple-choice, true/false, and essay questions, all of which are organized by chapter.

PEARSON MYTEST COMPUTERIZED TEST BANK
The twelfth edition Test Bank comes with Pearson MyTest, a powerful assessment-generation program that helps instructors easily create and print quizzes and exams. You can do this online, allowing flexibility and the ability to efficiently manage assessments at any time. You can easily access existing questions and edit, create, and store questions using the simple drag-and-drop and Word-like controls. Each question comes with information on its level of difficulty and is also mapped to the appropriate learning objective. For more information, go to www.pearsonhighered.com/mytest.

POWERPOINT PRESENTATION The PowerPoint presentation that accompanies *Communicating in Small Groups* includes ADA-compliant lecture slides based on key concepts in the text and can be easily customized for your classroom.

Acknowledgments

More than four decades ago, we met as new college professors sharing an office at the University of Miami. Today, we live only miles apart in different Texas communities and remain united by a common bond of friendship that has grown stronger over the years. Our collaboration as friends continues to make this book a labor of love. This book is a partnership not only between us as authors, but also with a support team of scholars, editors, colleagues, reviewers, students, and family members.

We are grateful to those who have reviewed this edition of our book to help make this a more useful instructional resource. Specifically, we thank Traci Letcher, University of Kentucky; James Luhrey, Mercyhurst University; Terri Lynne Johnson, Cleveland State University; Yeprem P. Davoodian, Los Angeles Pierce College; Brandy Stamper, UNC Charlotte; Deena Godwin, Clark College; Stephen DiDomenico, State University of New York Plattsburgh; Scott McAfee, College of the Canyons; Raymond Ozley, University of Montevallo; Suzanne Atkin, Portland State University; and Rod Carveth, Morgan State University.

We continue to be thankful for the talented editorial staff at Pearson. We are especially grateful to our talented editor, Priya Christopher, for her guidance and keen attention to detail along with the wealth of ideas provided by our content developer Elisa Rogers. We also thank Bhanuprakash Sherla for his expert assistance in skillfully keeping us on track and managing the logistics of preparing this new edition. We will always be grateful for the invaluable support of our long-time editor, publisher, and friend, Karon Bowers.

Steve thanks his colleagues and students at Texas State University for their encouragement and support. Casey Chilton, Mike Cornett, and Sue Stewart are gifted teachers who offer advice, encouragement, and friendship. We especially thank Kosta Tovstiadi, who provided expert assistance in helping to gather research for this new edition;

we appreciate his ongoing friendship and expertise. We also acknowledge Dennis and Laurie Romig of Side by Side Consulting, for their rich knowledge and practical insight about groups and teams that they have shared with us for many years. Sue Hall, Bob Hanna, and Chelsea Stockton are talented administrative assistants at Texas State and are invaluable colleagues who provide ongoing structure and interaction to maintain Steve's productivity.

John thanks his friends, colleagues, and students at Texas Lutheran University, who have taught, challenged, and inspired him.

Finally, as in our previous editions, we offer our appreciation and thanks to our families, who continue to teach us about the value of teamwork and collaboration. Our sons are taking their place in the world, and our spouses continue to be equal partners in all we do. John's sons, John III and Noah, are older than we both were when we began the first edition of this book. John III and Noah continue to make their dad smile with pride at their successes. Nancy Masterson continues, as always, as John's greatest love, best friend, and most respected critic.

Steve's sons, Mark and Matt, are now also older than their dad when he started this project. Matt and his wife Kara, both educators, teach us the power of supportive collaboration and teamwork. Steve's granddaughter, Mary, offers lessons of creativity, joy, and love. Mark and his wife Amanda continue to teach the importance of endurance and ever-present power of renewal, even when life presents ongoing challenges. Susan Beebe has been an integral part of the author team in this and every previous edition for 40 years. She continues to be Steve's personal Grammar Queen, life's love, and best friend.

Steven A. Beebe, San Marcos, Texas
John T. Masterson, Seguin, Texas

About the Authors

Steven A. Beebe

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Steven A. Beebe is Regents' and University Distinguished Professor *Emeritus* of Communication Studies at Texas State University. He served as chair of his department at Texas State for 28 years and concurrently as associate dean of the college of Fine Arts and Communication for 25 years. Before joining Texas State University, he was on the faculty of the University of Miami (Florida) for 10 years.

Professor Beebe is author and co-author of 12 books (with most books in multiple editions) that have been used at hundreds of universities throughout the world. He has also authored or co-authored more than 60 articles and book chapters and 150 professional papers with an emphasis on communication skill development.

Dr. Beebe has been a Visiting Scholar at both Oxford University and Cambridge University, and has given lectures and conference presentations internationally. During his 15 visits to Russia, he helped to establish the first communication studies programs in that country.

Dr. Beebe served as president of the National Communication Association and has received his university's top research and service awards; he was recently named a Piper Professor for the State of Texas. The National Speaker's Association has named him Outstanding Communication Professor in America.

He enjoys traveling, reading, researching and writing about C. S. Lewis, and playing the piano, and is a struggling cellist.

John T. Masterson

John T. Masterson is Executive Vice President and Provost *Emeritus* of Texas Lutheran University. He taught communication courses for more than 30 years and has presented or published dozens of papers and articles as well as books co-authored with Steven A. Beebe. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors for his teaching, scholarship, and service.

Prior to his move to Texas, Dr. Masterson served the University of Miami (Florida) for 22 years as professor of communication, associate dean of the School of Communication, dean of the Graduate School of International Studies, and vice provost for Undergraduate Affairs.

In his spare time, Dr. Masterson plays guitar and sings with the band Tin Roof Texas. Whenever possible, he and his wife Nancy take long road trips on their Harley Davidson motorcycle.

Chapter 1
Introducing Group Principles and Practices

"Working together works."

—Rob Gilbert

⌄ Learning Objectives

1.1 Define small group communication

1.2 Evaluate teams for effective practices

1.3 Identify the advantages and disadvantages of participating in small groups

1.4 Compare primary and secondary groups

1.5 Use methods to make virtual group meetings effective

1.6 Describe competencies of small group communication

Human beings collaborate. We are raised in family groups. We are educated and entertained in groups, and we work and worship in groups. We feel the need to establish collaborative relationships with others.

Regardless of your career choice, you will spend a considerable part of your work life collaborating with others in groups and teams. One survey of *Fortune* 500 companies found that 81 percent use team-based approaches to organize the work that needs to be done.[1] In addition, 77 percent use temporary teams and work groups when new projects develop.[2] The typical manager spends one fourth of the workweek in group meetings. In fact, the higher you rise in position and leadership authority, the more time you'll spend in meetings. Top-level leaders spend up to two-thirds of their time—an average of three days a week—in meetings or preparing for meetings.[3]

Not only will you spend time working with others in groups and teams, but you'll also find that the ability to collaborate with others is among the highest-valued skills in the workplace.[4]

Not all of our collaborations are face to face. In the twenty-first century, our collaboration has dramatically increased because of our use of technology. We are "hyper-connected."[5] Computer power that once needed a room-size space now fits in our pocket. We not only *GoToMeetings* online (thanks to *GoToMeeting* software) and *Zoom*, but because of "iCommunication" devices (iPhone, iPad,), numerous apps, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and ultra-high-speed/big-data/cloud-computing methods, we are connected to virtual groups and teams nearly all of our waking moments. Social networking platforms that include a mix of text messaging, blogs, video, and a host of other social media applications are not only taking the place of e-mail, but also making it likely that you will communicate in virtual groups more often than in face-to-face groups.[6] Collaboration, whether in person or using various forms of electronic media, is a daily element of our work, family, and social lives.[7] Applications of artificial intelligence (AI) and electronic collaboration are increasing. According to research firm McKinsey Global Institute, almost $40 billion was invested in AI research in 2016, and that investment continues to grow each year.[8]

Yet despite our constant collaboration whether in person or using technology, we sometimes (even often) have difficulty working collectively. Collaboration is hard. Because working collaboratively is challenging, we sometimes try to make collaboration less stressful. One study found that taking pain medication before a meeting makes attending the meeting more pleasant.[9] But rather than taking a pill, we want you to be successful because you have collaboration skills and the knowledge needed to be effective. Good communication skills help make collaboration more satisfying and effective.

Despite the widespread nature of working in groups, some people hate collaborating. Communication researcher Susan Sorenson coined the term **grouphate** to describe the dread and repulsion many people have about working in groups, teams, or attending meetings.[10] But we have good news: Grouphate diminishes when people receive training and instruction about working in groups. The purpose of this text, therefore, is to help you learn communication principles and become skilled in the practices that make working in groups productive and enjoyable.

Communication is the central focus of this text. Communication makes it possible for groups and teams to exist and function. If you use the text as a tool to help you learn to communicate in groups, you will distinguish yourself as a highly valued group member.

1.1: Communicating in Small Groups

OBJECTIVE: Define small group communication

Consider these situations:

- After the stock market plunges 1000 points in a week, the U.S. president appoints a high-level task force of economists to identify the causes of the market collapse.

- During a bid by the social networking site Connect.com to merge with a rival company, Relate.com, the chair of the board of Connect.com calls the board together to consider the virtues and pitfalls of the possible merger.

- To prepare for the final exam in your group communication class, you and several class members develop a webpage to share information and occasionally hold a video conference with other classmates to study and review for the test.

Each of these three examples involves a group of people meeting and communicating for a specific purpose. As group members communicate with one another, they are communicating transactively: They are simultaneously responding to one another and expressing ideas, information, and opinions. Although the purposes of the groups in these three scenarios are quite different, the groups have something in common—something that distinguishes them from a cluster of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator, for example. Just what is that "something"? What are the characteristics that make a group a group? We define **small group communication** as *communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.* Let's explore this definition in more detail.

∨   **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

1.1.1   Describe the process of communication

1.1.2   Describe the characteristics of a small group

1.1.3   Identify the characteristic of meeting with a common purpose as an essential element of small group communication

1.1.4   Identify the characteristic of feeling a sense of belonging to a group as an essential element of small group communication

1.1.5   Identify the characteristic of exerting influence on others as an essential element of small group communication

1.1.1: Communication

OBJECTIVE: Describe the process of communication

Reduced to its essence, **communication** is the process of acting on information.[11] Someone does or says something, and there is a response from someone else in the form of an action, a word, or a thought. Merely presenting information to others does not mean there is communication: Information is not communication. "But I told you what I wanted!" "I put it in the memo. Why didn't you do what I asked?" "It's in the syllabus." Such expressions of exasperation assume that if you send a message, someone will receive it. However, communication does not operate in a linear, input–output process. What you send is rarely what others understand. **Human communication** is the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages.[12]

Communication Process
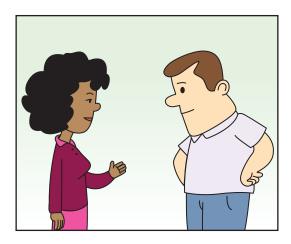
Communication Is about Making Sense—We make sense out of what we experience when we interpret what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Typically, in a small group, multiple people are sending multiple messages, often at the same time. To make sense of the myriad messages we experience, we look for patterns or structure; we relate what happens to us at any given moment to something we've experienced in the past through the lens of our culture.[13]
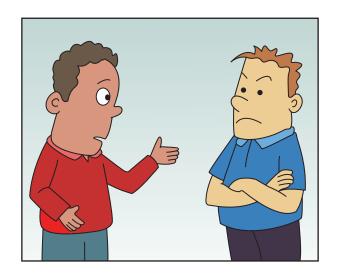
Communication Is about Sharing Sense—We share what we experience by expressing it to others and to ourselves. We use words as well as nonverbal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, clothing, and music) to convey our thoughts and feelings to others.

Communication Is about Creating Meaning—Meaning is created in the hearts and minds of both the message source and the message receiver. We don't send meaning; we create it based on our experiences, background, and culture.

Communication Is about Verbal and Nonverbal Messages—Words and nonverbal behaviors are symbols that we use to communicate and derive meaning that makes sense to us. A **symbol** is something that represents a thought, concept, object, or experience. The words on this page are symbols that you are using to derive meaning that makes sense to you. Nonverbal symbols such as our use of gestures, posture, tone of voice, clothing, and jewelry primarily communicate emotions—our feelings of joy or sadness, our likes and dislikes, or whether we're interested or uninterested in others.
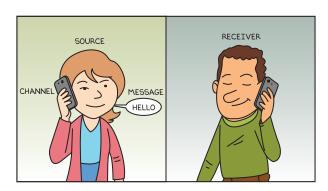
Communication Is Transactional—Live, in-person, human communication, as well as communicating virtually via video channels, is **transactional**, meaning that when we communicate, we send and receive messages simultaneously. As you talk to someone, you respond to that person's verbal and nonverbal messages, even while you speak. In the context of a small group, even if you remain silent or

nod off to sleep, your nonverbal behavior provides information to others about your emotions and interest, or lack of interest. The transactive nature of communication suggests that you cannot avoid communicating. Ultimately, people judge you by your behavior, not by your intent. And since you behave in some way (even when you're asleep), there is the potential for someone to make sense out of your behavior.

Communication Includes Several Elements—Key elements of communication include the source, message, receiver, and channel. The **source** of the message is the originator of the ideas and feelings expressed. The **message** is the information being communicated. The **receiver** of the message is the person or persons who interpret the message. The **channel** is the means by which the message is expressed to the receiver. **Noise** is anything that interferes with a message being interpreted by the receiver as intended by the source. **Feedback** is the response to a message. **Context** includes the physical and psychological environment for communication.

Communication May Be Mediated—Do groups need to communicate face to face to be considered a group? More and more small group meetings occur in a **mediated setting**—a setting in which the channel of communication is a phone line, fiber-optic cable, wireless signal, the Internet, or other means of sending messages to others; the interaction is not face to face. In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly easy and efficient to collaborate using the Internet, and other technological means of communicating. So, yes: A group can be a group even without meeting face to face.[14]

Mediated Communication Can Enhance Group Communication—In the past four decades, we have learned more about how mediated communication can enhance group communication. For example, evidence shows that some groups linked together only by e-mail or a computer network can generate more and better ideas than groups that meet face to face.[15] Unfortunately, such communication may be hindered by sluggish feedback or delayed replies, which are not problems when we collaborate in person. Also, although more ideas may be generated in a mediated meeting, complex problems and relationship issues are better handled in person than on the Internet or through another mediated network.[16] In most cases, in-person communication affords the best opportunity to clarify meaning and resolve uncertainty and misunderstanding. We will discuss the use of technology in groups and teams in a section in this chapter and throughout the text in a special feature called Virtual Collaboration.

Communication Is Essential for Effective Group Outcome—Does the quality of communication really affect what a group accomplishes? Because this is a book about group communication, you won't be surprised that our answer is *yes*—whether communicating in person or virtually.[17] Researchers have debated, however, the precise role of communication in contributing to a group's success.[18] Success depends on a variety of factors besides communication, such as the personality of the group members, how motivated the members are to contribute, how much information members have, and the innate talent group members have for collaboration. Nevertheless, several researchers

have found that the way group members communicate with each other is crucial in determining what happens when people collaborate.[19] Research investigating the importance of small group communication in a variety of situations continues to increase.

1.1.2: A Small Group of People

OBJECTIVE: Describe the characteristics of a small group

A group includes at least three people; two people are a **dyad**. The addition of a third person immediately adds complexity and an element of uncertainty to the transactive communication process.

If at least three people are required for a **small group**, what is the maximum number of members a group may have and still be considered small? Scholars do not agree on a specific number. However, having more than 12 people (some say 13, others say 20) in a group significantly decreases individual members' interaction. Research documents that larger groups just aren't as effective as smaller groups.[20] The larger the group, the less influence each individual has on the group and the more likely it is that subgroups will develop.[21] With 20 or more people, the communication more closely resembles a public-speaking situation when one person addresses an audience, providing less opportunity for all members to participate freely. The larger the group, the more likely it is that some group members will become passive rather than actively involved in the discussion.

1.1.3: Meeting with a Common Purpose

OBJECTIVE: Identify the characteristic of meeting with a common purpose as an essential element of small group communication

Why do small groups convene? The president's economic task force, the Relate.com company executives' group, and your communication study group have one thing in common: Their members have a specific purpose for meeting. They share a concern for the objectives of the group. Although a group of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator may share the goal of transportation, they do not have a collective goal. Their individual destinations are different. Their primary concerns are for themselves, not for others. As soon as their individual goals are realized, they leave the bus or elevator. In contrast, a goal keeps a committee or discussion group together until that goal is realized. Many groups fail to remain together because they never identify their common purpose. While participants in small groups may have somewhat different motives for their membership, a common purpose cements the group together.

1.1.4: Feeling a Sense of Belonging

OBJECTIVE: Identify the characteristic of feeling a sense of belonging to a group as an essential element of small group communication

Not only do group members need a mutual concern to unite them, but they also need to feel they belong to the group. Commuters waiting for a bus probably do not perceive themselves to be part of a collective effort. Members of a small group, however, need to have a sense of identity with the group; they should be able to feel it is their group.[22] Members of a small group are aware that a group exists and that they are members of the group to work for the common goals of the group.[23]

1.1.5: Exerting Influence

OBJECTIVE: Identify the characteristic of exerting influence on others as an essential element of small group communication

Each member of a small group, in one way or another, potentially influences others. Even if a group member sits in stony silence while other group members actively verbalize opinions and ideas, the silence of that one member may be interpreted as agreement by another member. Nonverbal messages have a powerful influence on a group's climate.

At its essence, the process of influencing others defines leadership. To some degree, each member of a small group exerts some leadership in the group because of his or her potential to influence others.[24] Although some groups have an elected or appointed leader, most group members have some opportunity to share in how the work gets done and how group members relate to each other. Thus, if we define the role of leader rather broadly, each group member has an opportunity to fill the role of leader by offering contributions and suggestions. Regardless of its size, a group achieves optimal success when each person accepts some responsibility for influencing and leading others.

To some degree, each team member is a leader because of his or her potential to influence other members, and to accept a share in the responsibility of influencing the team.

WRITING PROMPT

Studying Small Group Communication

As you begin your study of small group communication, identify several specific objectives of your study. Consider these questions: What would you like to learn about small groups? Which specific communication skills would you like to improve? How would you like the meetings you attend to be improved?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

1.2: Communicating in Teams

OBJECTIVE: Evaluate teams for effective practices

"Go, team!" You can hear this chant at most sports events. Whether playing in a touch football game or in the Super Bowl, members of sports teams are rewarded for working together. Corporate America has also learned that working in teams can enhance productivity, efficiency, worker satisfaction, and corporate profits. Regardless of whether its members play football or construct webpages, a **team** is a coordinated group of individuals organized to work together to achieve a specific, common goal. Teamwork is increasingly emphasized as a way to accomplish tasks and projects because teamwork works.[25] An effectively functioning team gets results.[26] Research clearly documents the increased use of teams in corporate America during the past two decades, especially in larger, more complex organizations.[27]

Because we have clearly defined small group communication, you may be wondering, "What's the difference between a group and a team?" Often people use the terms "group" and "team" interchangeably. But are they different concepts, or is there merely a semantic difference between a group and a team? Our view is that teams are often more highly structured than typical small groups. Teams have more clearly defined roles, rules, goals, and procedures. All teams are small groups, but not all groups operate as a team. The terms are not interchangeable.

Four Attributes That Define Teams

Highly effective teams usually have at least four attributes that give the term *team* distinct meaning.

Teams Develop Clear, Well-Defined Goals—Team goals are clear, specific, and measurable. They are also more ambitious than the goals that could be achieved by any individuals on the team. Teams that develop and use clear goals have been found to perform better than groups without clear-cut goals.[28] A sports team knows that the goal is to win the game. An advertising team's goal is to sell the most product. Teams develop a clear goal so that the members know when they've achieved it.

Teams Develop Clearly Defined Roles, Duties, and Responsibilities—People who belong to a team usually have a clear sense of their particular role or function on the team. As on a sports team, each team member understands how his or her job or responsibility helps the team achieve the goal. The roles and responsibilities of team members are explicitly discussed.[29] If one member is absent, other members know what needs to be done to accomplish that person's responsibilities. Sometimes team members may be trained to take on several roles just in case a member is absent; this is called **cross-functional team-role training**. Team members' understanding of other members' responsibilities helps the team to work more effectively.[30] In a group, the participants may perform specific roles and duties; by comparison, on a team, greater care must be devoted to explicitly ensuring that the individual roles and responsibilities are clear and linked to a common goal or outcome. In fact, the key challenge in team development is to teach individuals who are used to performing individual tasks how to work together.

Teams Have Clearly Defined Rules and Expectations—Teams develop specific operating systems to help them function well. A **rule** is a prescription for acceptable behavior. For example, a team may establish as a rule that all meetings will start and end on time. Another rule may be that if a team member is absent from a meeting, the absent member will contact the meeting leader after the meeting to get an update. Although expectations develop in groups, in a team those expectations, rules, and procedures are often overtly stated or written down. Team members know what the rules are and how those rules benefit the entire team.

Teams Are Coordinated and Collaborative—Team members discuss how to collaborate and work together. Sports teams spend many hours practicing how to anticipate the moves

of other team members so that, as in an intricate dance, all team members are moving to the same beat. Team members develop interdependent relationships: What happens to one affects everyone on the team. Of course, team members may be given individual assignments, but those assignments are clearly coordinated with other members' duties so that all members are working together. Today, it is increasingly likely that team members will belong to several teams and will need to clarify the roles they assume in multiple teams simultaneously.[31] Coordination and collaboration are the hallmark methods of a team.[32] Research shows that when teams are trained to coordinate and adapt their communication with one another, they have greater success than teams not trained to coordinate their communication.[33] Although groups work together, they may accomplish their goal with less collaboration and coordination.

Even though we've made distinctions between groups and teams, we are not saying they are dramatically different entities. Think of these two concepts as existing on a continuum: Some gatherings will have more elements of a group, whereas others will be closer to our description of a team.

Business and nonprofit organizations tend to use the term "team" rather than "group" to identify individuals who work together to achieve a common task. Corporate

training departments often spend much time and money to train their employees to be better team members covering communication principles and practices such as: problem solving, decision making, listening, and conflict management. In addition to using communication skills, team members set goals, evaluate the quality of their work, and establish team operating procedures.[34] Research has found that people who have been trained to work together in a team are, in fact, better team members.[35] So the news is good: There is evidence that learning principles and practices of group and team communication can enhance your performance.

∨ By the end of this module, you will be able to:

1.2.1 Describe an effective team at work

1.2.2 Identify effective teammates by their actions

1.2.3 Characterize behaviors of effective team members

1.2.1: Characteristics of an Effective Team
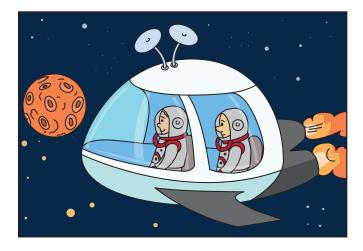
OBJECTIVE: Describe an effective team at work

A number of researchers have studied ways to make teams function better.[36] One study found that team members need work schedules compatible with those of their colleagues, adequate resources to obtain the information needed to do the work, leadership skills, and help from the organization to get the job done.[37] Another study concluded that it's not how smart team members are, but rather how well they communicate that improves teamwork.[38] Researchers who speculate about the ideal team characteristics of those astronauts who may one day travel to Mars suggest that an effective team of space travelers needs to be flexible and adapt to changing conditions, embrace the shift from individual to collective tasks, and recognize that the nature and function of team characteristics is a "moving target."[39]
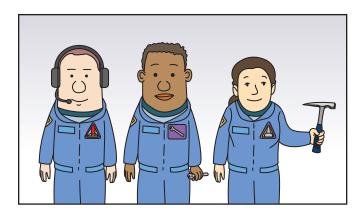
Ideal Team Characteristics

Using studies of several real-life teams (such as NASA, McDonald's, and sports teams), Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto identified eight classic hallmarks of an effective team. The more of these characteristics a team has, the more likely it is that the team will be effective.[40]
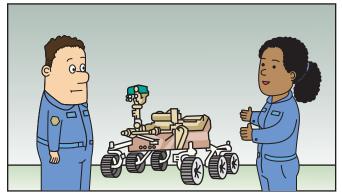
A Clear, Elevating Goal—Having a common, well-defined goal is the single most important attribute of an effective team.[41] But having a goal is not enough; the goal should be elevating and important—it should excite team members and motivate them to make sacrifices for the good of the team. Sports teams use the elevating goal of winning the

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Review

Comparing Groups and Teams

All teams are small groups. Thus, when we refer to a team, we will also be referring to a small group. Likewise, the principles and practices of effective small group communication also apply to teams.

	Groups	Teams
Goals	Goals may be discussed in general terms.	Clear, elevating goals drive all aspects of team accomplishment.
Roles and responsibilities	Roles and responsibilities may be discussed but are not always explicitly defined or developed.	Roles and responsibilities are explicitly developed and discussed.
Rules	Rules and expectations are often not formally developed and evolve according to the group's needs.	Rules and operating procedures are clearly discussed and developed to help the team work together.
Methods	Group members interact, and work may be divided among group members.	Team members collaborate and explicitly discuss how to coordinate their efforts and work together. Teams work together interdependently.

game or the championship. Corporate teams also need an exciting goal that all team members believe is important.

A Results-Driven Structure—To be results-driven is to have an efficient, organized, and structured method of achieving team outcomes.[42] Team structure is the way in which a team is organized to process information so as to ensure that enough time is spent on the task to achieve the goal.[43] Explicit statements of who reports to whom and who does what are key elements of team structure. It is useful, therefore, for teams to develop a clear sense of the roles and responsibilities of each team member. A team needs individuals who perform task roles (getting the job done) and individuals who perform maintenance roles (managing the team process) to accomplish the task.[44] A structure that is not results-driven—one that tolerates ineffective meetings, off-task talk, busywork, and "administrivia"—always detracts from team effectiveness.
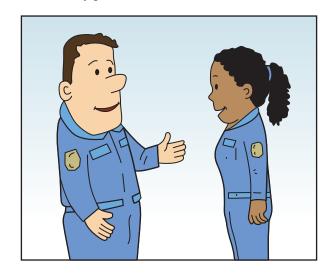
Competent Team Members—Team members need to know not only *what* their assignment is, but also *how* to perform their job.[45] Team members need to be trained and educated so they know what to do and when to do it. Without adequate training in both teamwork skills and job skills, the team will likely flounder.[46]

Unified Commitment—The motto of the Thre Musketeers—"all for one and one for all"—serves as an accurate statement of the attitude team members should have when working together to achieve a clear, elevating goal. Team members need to feel united by their commitment and dedication to achieve the task.
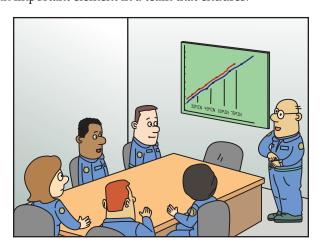
A Collaborative Climate—Effective teams foster a positive group climate and the skills and principles needed to achieve their goal. Effective teams operate in a climate of support rather than defensiveness.[47] Team members should confirm one another, support one another, and listen to one another as they perform their work.
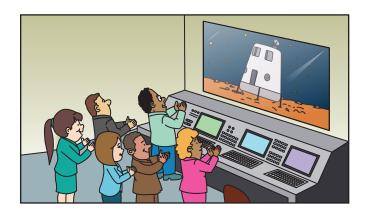
Standards of Excellence—A team is more likely to achieve its potential if it establishes high standards and believes it

can achieve its goals.[48] Goals that cause the team to stretch a bit can serve to galvanize a team into action. Unobtainable or unrealistic goals, however, can result in team frustration. If the entire team is involved in setting goals, the team members are more likely to feel a sense of ownership of the standards they have established.
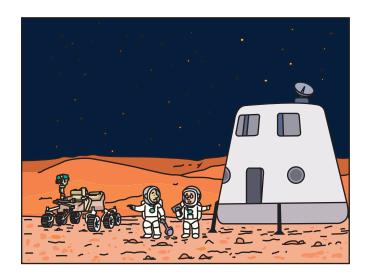
Does having high standards really have an impact on what a team can produce? If you've ever heard a Steinway piano—the gold standard of pianos—then you've benefited from the high standards of teamwork. Einrich Englehard Steinwege emigrated from Germany to New York in 1850, changed his name to Henry Steinway, and with four of his sons started his own piano company. Since 1853, each piano has been made by a team of workers with exacting standards. Steinway pianos have remained the most desired piano among concert pianists for more than 100 years. Steinway pianos are found in 95 percent of all concert halls in the world because of the unflinching high standards of each piano-making team. Having high standards of excellence is an important element in a team that endures.[49]

External Support and Recognition—Teams in any organization do not operate in isolation: They need support from outside the team to help acquire the information and materials needed to do the job. Perhaps that's why evidence suggests that teams who have a broad social network of colleagues and friends perform better than teams who lack a well-developed social network.[50] Team members also need to be recognized and rewarded for their efforts by others outside the team.[51] Positive, reinforcing feedback enhances team performance and feelings of team importance.[52] Evidence suggests that less positive support from others discourages some team members from giving their full effort; negative feedback causes more group members to withhold their full effort.[53] Most coaches acknowledge the "home-field advantage" that flows from the enthusiastic support and accolades of team followers. Corporate teams, too, need external support and recognition to help them function at maximum effectiveness.

Principled Leadership—Teams need effective leaders. This is not to say that a team requires an authoritarian leader to dictate who should do what. On the contrary, teams usually function more effectively when they adopt shared approaches to leadership. In the most effective teams, leadership responsibilities are spread throughout the team.

1.2.2: Characteristics of Effective Team Members

OBJECTIVE: Identify effective teammates by their actions

Whether you are selecting team members to win a game or to work with you on a class project, you should look for certain characteristics when picking effective team members.[54]

- **Experienced** team members are practical in managing the problems and issues they face; they've "been there, done that."
- **Skilled problem-solvers** effectively identify and solve problems. Being indecisive, dithering, and shying away from team problems have negative impacts on team success.

- **Open to new ideas** is a basic ingredient for team success; having team members who are straightforward and willing to appropriately discuss delicate issues is a predictor of team success.

- **Supportive** team members listen to others, are willing to pitch in and accomplish the job, and have an optimistic outlook about team success.[55] Supportive team members talk with group members outside formal group meetings; they develop a positive relationship with group members that is not solely based on accomplishing the task.[56] Unsupportive members try to control team members and focus on their individual interests rather than on team interests.

- **Positive** team members are encouraging, motivated, patient, enthusiastic, friendly, and well liked.[57] By contrast, being competitive, argumentative, negative, and impatient are perceived as hindrances to team success. Effective team members believe they have the skills and resources necessary to accomplish their task.[58] Team members who think they will be less effective are, in fact, less effective.[59] By contrast, team members who are more effective think they will have more positive results because of the self-perceived quality of the team.[60]

- **Action-oriented** team members focus on "strategic doing" as well as on "strategic thinking" and are vital for team success. Procrastinating and being slow to take action reduce team effectiveness.[61]

- **Adaptive** team members learn from both their successes and their failures.[62] They see which results they get and then adapt their behavior accordingly. Ineffective teams don't learn from their mistakes and don't try new things; they keep making the same mistakes over and over again. One of the important characteristics that individual team members need to have is the ability to learn and adapt their behavior so that they can adjust to new circumstances.[63]

1.2.3: Strategies for Becoming an Effective Team Member

OBJECTIVE: Characterize behaviors of effective team members

It's one thing to know what effective team members should do to be effective, such as being supportive, understanding the problem-solving process, and having a positive personal style. It's even more important, though, to actually putting those principles into practice. The research is clear that team members who receive team training in how to perform specific skills to enhance team performance are more effective.[64]

Group communication researcher Jessica Thompson discovered that the following behaviors can enhance your perception of competence when you work with other team members:[65]

- **Be there** and spend time together with other team members. Team members who don't spend as much time interacting with one another aren't perceived as competent.

- **Talk about the importance of trusting one another.** Make trust a specific expectation for all team members by verbalizing the importance of developing trust.

- **Talk about the task** you are undertaking as a team. Rather than just quietly doing the work, explicitly talk about what the team is doing to accomplish the team goal.

- **Be clear** with the meanings of words and phrases by defining words that may be unfamiliar to other team members. Also, avoid using unfamiliar acronyms (abbreviations for phrases, such as "PDC" for Personnel and Discipline Committee), unless such phrases are common knowledge to all team members.

- **Listen** to one another and observe and reflect upon what team members see and hear.

- **Talk "backstage."** Talk with group members outside formal group meetings; develop a relationship with group members that is not solely based on being task oriented.

- **Laugh** and have fun together. Use appropriate humor and share jokes with one another.

What are the behaviors that might hurt the perception of a team member's competence?

According to the same researcher, here's a list of what not to do:

- **Don't be negative** or question the expertise of other group members.

- **Don't use mean humor**—that is, negative humor (a joke at someone's expense) or sarcasm.

- **Don't verbally express your boredom** by telling other team members that you are bored.

- **Don't grab credit** by jockeying for a position of power and trying to gain personal credit for the work you do (and even don't do).

Enacting this simple list of dos and don'ts won't ensure that you'll be a competent team member, but research suggests that these behaviors can contribute to an overall perception of competence. In addition to these specific strategies, make sure your team also exemplifies the characteristics of an effective team and team members. If others perceive you as competent, you are more likely to behave in ways that enhance competent behavior.

1.3: Communicating Collaboratively in Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages

OBJECTIVE: Identify the advantages and disadvantages of participating in small groups

There is no question about it: You will definitely find yourself working in groups and teams. Collaborative projects are becoming the mainstay method of accomplishing work in all organizations. Students from kindergarten through graduate school are frequently called on to work on group projects.

How do you feel about working in groups and teams? Maybe you dread attending group meetings. Perhaps you agree with the observation that a committee is a group that keeps minutes but wastes hours. You may believe that groups bumble and stumble along until they reach some sort of compromise—a compromise with which no one is pleased. "To be effective," said one observer, "a committee should be made up of three people. But to get anything done, one member should be sick and another absent."

By understanding both the advantages and the potential pitfalls of working collaboratively, you can form more realistic expectations while capitalizing on the virtues of group work and minimizing the obstacles to success.[66] First, we'll identify advantages of group collaboration; then we'll present potential disadvantages.

> ⌄ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

1.3.1 Describe the advantages of group work

1.3.2 Explain how to overcome the disadvantages of working in small groups

1.3.3 Determine when group work is unnecessary

1.3.1: Advantages of Working in Groups

OBJECTIVE: Describe the advantages of group work

Collaboration has benefits. Working in groups and teams has many advantages over working alone. Working collaboratively results in more information, enhanced creative problem solving, greater comprehension, enhanced satisfaction, and enhanced self-understanding.

MORE INFORMATION   On the TV game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* contestants who phone a friend get the right answer to the question 65 percent of the time. But if the contestant asks the audience for help, they get the right answer 91 percent of the time.[67] As this example suggests,

there's wisdom in groups and teams. Because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences that individuals bring to a group, the group as a whole has more information and ideas from which to seek solutions to a problem than one person would have alone.[68] Because they have access to more information and ideas, groups usually outperform individual performance—that's why it's important to study how we communicate in small groups.[69] Research clearly documents that a group whose members have diverse backgrounds, including ethnic diversity, comes up with better-quality ideas.[70] With more information available, the group is more likely to discuss all sides of an issue and to arrive at a better solution.[71] The key, of course, is whether group members share what they know. When group members do share information, the group outcome is better than when they don't share what they know with other group members.[72] Although group members tend to start out by discussing what they already know, groups still have the advantage of having greater potential information to share with other group members.[73]

ENHANCED CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING   Research on groups generally supports the maxim that "two heads are better than one" when it comes to solving problems.[74] Groups usually make better decisions than individuals working alone, because groups have more approaches to or methods of solving a specific problem. A group of people with various backgrounds, experiences, and resources can more creatively consider ways to solve a problem than one person can.

GREATER COMPREHENSION   Working in groups and teams fosters improved learning and comprehension, because you are actively involved rather than passive. Imagine that your history professor announces that the final exam will be comprehensive. History is not your best subject, and you realize you need help to prepare for the exam. What do you do? You may form a study group with other classmates. Your decision to study with a group of people is wise; education theorists claim that when you take an active role in the learning process, your comprehension of information is improved. If you studied for the exam by yourself, you would not have the benefit of asking and answering questions of other study group members. By discussing a subject with a group, you learn more and improve your comprehension of the subject.

ENHANCED SATISFACTION   Group problem solving provides an opportunity for group members to participate in making decisions and achieving the group goal. Individuals who help solve problems in a group are more committed to the solution and better satisfied with their participation in the group than if they weren't involved in the discussion.

ENHANCED SELF-UNDERSTANDING   Working in groups helps you gain a more accurate picture of how

others see you. The feedback you receive helps you recognize personal characteristics that you may be unaware of but that others perceive. By becoming sensitive to feedback, you can understand yourself better (or at least better understand how others perceive you) than you would if you worked alone. Group interaction and feedback can be useful in helping you examine your interpersonal behavior and in deciding whether you want to change your communication style.[75]

Why do these advantages occur? One explanation is **social facilitation**[76]—that is, the tendency for people to work harder simply because other people are present.[77] Why does this happen? Some researchers suggest that the increased effort may occur because people need and expect positive evaluations from others; some people want to be liked and they work harder when others are around so that they gain more positive feedback. Social facilitation seems to occur with greater consistency if the group task is simple rather than complex.

1.3.2: Disadvantages of Working in Groups

OBJECTIVE: **Explain how to overcome the disadvantages of working in small groups**

Although working in small groups and teams can produce positive results, problems sometimes occur when people congregate. Consider some of the disadvantages of working in groups.

Common Problems in Group Work and How to Fix Them

Pressure to Conform—Most people dislike conflict; they generally try to avoid it. Some avoid conflict because they believe that in an effective group, members readily reach agreement. But this tendency to avoid controversy in relationships can affect the quality of a group decision. What is wrong with group members reaching agreement? Nothing, unless they are agreeing to conform to the majority opinion or even to the leader's opinion just to avoid conflict. Social psychologist Irving Janis calls this phenomenon **groupthink**—when groups agree primarily to avoid conflict.[78] Speaking up to avoid groupthink is a good thing to do: Research has found that a well-spoken minority opinion can sway a group outcome.[79]

Solutions: Encourage critical, independent thinking. Be sensitive to status differences that may affect decision making. Invite someone from outside the group to evaluate the group's decision-making process. Assign a group member the role of devil's advocate.

Individual Domination—In some groups, it seems as if one person must run the show. That member wants to make the decisions and insists that his or her position on the issue is the best one. "Well," you might say, "if this person wants to do all the work, that's fine with me. It sure will be a lot easier for me." Yes, if you permit a member or two to dominate the group, you may do less work yourself—but you also forfeit the greater fund of knowledge and more creative approaches that come with full participation. Other members may not feel satisfied because they feel alienated from the decision making.
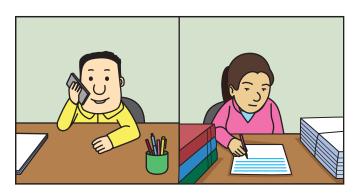
Solutions: Try to use the domineering member's enthusiasm to the group's advantage. If an individual tries to monopolize the discussion, other group members should channel that interest more constructively. The talkative member, for example, could be given a special research assignment. Of course, if the domineering member continues to monopolize the discussion, other members may have to confront that person and suggest that others be given an opportunity to present their views.

Uneven Work Distribution—When working in groups, individuals may be tempted to rely too much on others rather than pitch in and help. In the problem known as **social loafing**, some group members hold back on their contributions (loaf), assuming others will do the work.[80] They can get away with this behavior because in a group or team, no one

will be able to pin the lack of work on a single group member. There is less accountability for who does what.[81] Working together distributes the responsibility of accomplishing a task among all members, which should be an advantage of group work. However, when some members allow others to carry the workload, problems can develop. Just because you are part of a group, it does not mean that you can get lost in the crowd: Your input is needed. Do not abdicate your responsibility to another group member.[82] There's also evidence that people are more likely to hang back and let others do the work if they simply don't like to work in groups or don't really care what others think of them.[83]

Solutions: Encourage less-talkative group members to contribute to the discussion. Make sure each person knows the goals and objectives of the group. Encourage each member to attend every meeting. Poor attendance at group meetings is a sure sign that members are falling into the "Let someone else do it" syndrome. See that each person knows and fulfills his or her specific responsibilities to the group.

Time—One of the major frustrations about group work is the time it takes to accomplish tasks. Not only does a group have to find a time and place where everyone can meet (sometimes a serious problem in itself), but a group simply requires more time to talk and listen, define, analyze, research, and solve problems than do individuals working alone. And time is money! One researcher estimates that one 2-hour meeting attended by 20 executives would cost the equivalent of a week's salary for one of them.[84] Still, talking and listening in a group usually results in a better solution.

Solutions: Budget more time to work on problems and issues collaboratively than you would individually. To minimize the time expenditure, make sure you have a clear goal and that all group members have the same goal in mind as they participate in the group deliberations. Use a well-developed agenda to keep group members focused on the issues at hand. Time is wasted when groups get off-task and pursue individual rather than group goals. Use good facilitation skills to summarize the group's progress, keep the group on-task, and ensure that the group's relational needs are addressed.

Review

Advantages and Disadvantages of Communicating Collaboratively

Advantages	Disadvantages
Groups have more information.	Group members may pressure others to conform.
Groups are often more creative problem solvers.	Groups could be dominated by one person.
Group work improves learning.	Group members may rely too much on others and not do their part.
Group members are more satisfied if they participate in the process.	Group work takes more time than working individually.
Group members learn about themselves.	

1.3.3: When Not to Collaborate

OBJECTIVE: Determine when group work is unnecessary

Although we've noted significant advantages to working in groups and teams, our discussion of the disadvantages of groups and teams suggests there may be situations when it's best *not* to collaborate. What situations call for individual work? Read on.

WHEN THERE IS LIMITED TIME   If a decision must be made quickly, it may sometimes be better to delegate the decision to an expert. In the heat of battle, commanders usually do not call for a committee meeting of all their troops to decide when to strike. True, the troops may be

better satisfied with a decision that they have participated in making, but the obvious need for a quick decision overrides any advantages that may be gained from meeting as a group.

WHEN AN EXPERT HAS THE ANSWER   If you want to know what it's like to be president of a university, you don't need to form a committee to answer that question: You should just ask some university presidents what they do. Or, if you want to know mathematical formulas, scientific theories, or other information that an expert could readily tell you, go ask the expert rather than forming a fact-finding committee. Creating a group to gather information that an expert already knows wastes time.

WHEN THE INFORMATION NEEDED IS READILY AVAILABLE   In this information age, a wealth of information is available with a click of a mouse. It may not be necessary to form a committee to chase after information that already exists. It may be helpful to put together a group or team if the information needed is extensive and several people are needed to conduct an exhaustive search. But if names, facts, dates, or other pieces of information can be quickly found on the Internet, use those methods rather than making a simple task more complex by forming a group to get the information.[85]

WHEN CONFLICT IS UNMANAGEABLE   Although both of your authors are optimists, sometimes bringing people together for discussion and dialogue is premature. When conflict clearly may explode into something worse, it may be best to first try other communication formats before putting warring parties in a group to discuss the contentious issue. What may be needed instead of group discussion is more structured communication, such as mediation or negotiation with a leader or facilitator. Or, if group members have discussed an issue and just can't reach a decision, they may decide to let someone else make the decision for them. The judicial system is used when people can't or won't work things out in a rational, logical discussion.

But you shouldn't avoid forming or participating in groups just because of conflict. Conflict is almost always present in groups; disagreements can challenge a group to develop a better solution. Even so, if the conflict is intractable, another method of making the decision may be best.

Be aware that collectivistic cultures value group or team achievement more than individual achievement. Many people from Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan typically value collaboration and collective achievement more than do some people from individualistic cultures. Venezuela, Colombia, and Pakistan are other countries in which people score high on a collective approach to work methods.[86] In collectivistic cultures, *we* is more important than *me*. Collectivistic cultures usually think of a group as

the primary unit in society, whereas individualistic cultures think about the individual.[87]

As you might guess, people from individualistic cultures tend to find it more challenging to collaborate in group projects than do people from collectivistic cultures.

The advantages of communicating in groups and teams are less likely to be realized if individualistic assumptions consistently trump collectivistic assumptions.

Individualism and Collectivism in Small Groups[88]

Individualistic Assumptions	Collectivistic Assumptions
The most effective decisions are made by individuals.	The most effective decisions are made by teams.
Planning should be centralized and done by the leaders.	Planning is best done by all concerned.
Individuals should be rewarded.	Groups or teams should be rewarded.
Individuals work primarily for themselves.	Individuals work primarily for the team.
Healthy competition between colleagues is more important than teamwork.	Teamwork is more important than competition.
Meetings are mainly for sharing information with individuals.	Meetings are mainly for making group or team decisions.
To get something accomplished, you should work with individuals.	To get something accomplished, you should work with the whole group or team.
A key objective in group meetings is to advance your own ideas.	A key objective in group meetings is to reach consensus or agreement.
Team meetings should be controlled by the leader or chair.	Team meetings should be a place for all team members to bring up what they want.
Group or team meetings are often a waste of time.	Group or team meetings are the best way to achieve a goal.

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Review

Group Collaboration

Knowing when to collaborate (and when not to collaborate) will maximize the efficacy of individuals as well as groups.

> **WRITING PROMPT**
>
> **What Type of Collaboration Is Appropriate?**
>
> Review the following scenarios and identify whether each one requires a group, requires a team, or doesn't require collaboration.
>
> Scenario 1: Several of your friends have decided to meet once a month to form a book club.
>
> Scenario 2: You are working with several people who are trying to get your good friend elected to the local school board.
>
> Scenario 3: You are working with members of your local library to obtain financial sponsors for the community book drive to raise money for the library.
>
> Scenario 4: You want to identify the number of people who do not wear seatbelts in your state.

▶   The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

1.4: Communicating in Different Types of Groups

OBJECTIVE: Compare primary and secondary groups

There are two broad categories of groups—primary and secondary. Within these broad types, groups can be categorized according to their purpose and function. To give you an idea of the multiple types of groups to which you belong, we'll define these two broad types and then note specific functions within each type.

⌄   **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

1.4.1   **Explain how primary groups fulfill their purpose**

1.4.2   **Characterize secondary groups**

1.4.1: Primary Groups

OBJECTIVE: Explain how primary groups fulfill their purpose

A **primary group** is a group whose main purpose is to give people a way to fulfill their need to associate with others. It is primary in the sense that the group meets the primary human need to relate to others. The main function of such a group is to perpetuate the group so that members can continue to enjoy one another's company. Primary groups typically do not meet regularly to solve problems or make decisions, although they sometimes do both of those things.

FAMILY GROUPS   Your family is the most fundamental of all primary groups. In his poem "The Death of the Hired Man," Robert Frost mused, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there/They have to take you in." Family communication usually does not follow a structured agenda; family conversation is informal and flows naturally from the context and content emerging from the family's experiences. Although family groups do accomplish things together, at the core of a family group is the association of simply being a family.

SOCIAL GROUPS   In addition to family groups, you may have groups of friends who interact over an extended period of time. These groups also exist to meet the primary human need for fellowship and human interaction. As in a family group, conversation in social groups, such as your various groups of friends, is informal and typically does not have a preplanned agenda. You associate with one another for the joy of community—to fulfill the basic human need to be social. Our focus in this text is less on primary groups and more on secondary groups, which accomplish specific tasks such as problem solving, decision making, and learning.

1.4.2: Secondary Groups

OBJECTIVE: **Characterize secondary groups**

Secondary groups exist to accomplish a task or achieve a goal. Most of the groups you belong to at work or school are secondary groups. You are not involved in a committee or a class group assignment just for fun or to meet your social need for belonging (even though you may enjoy the group and make friends with other group members). Instead, the main reason you join secondary groups is to get something done.[89]

Types of Secondary Groups

There are several kinds of secondary groups to which you may belong at some point in your life.[90]

Problem-Solving Groups—A **problem-solving group** exists to overcome some unsatisfactory situation or obstacles to achieving a goal. Many, if not most, groups in business and industry are problem-solving groups. The most common problem that any organization faces (whether it's a for-profit business or a nonprofit organization) is finding a way to make more money.

Decision-Making Groups—The task of a **decision-making group** is to make a choice from among several alternatives. The group must identify what the possible choices are, discuss the consequences of the choices, and then select the alternative that best meets a need or achieves the goal of the group or parent organization. A committee that screens applicants for a job has the task of making a decision. The group must select one person from among the many candidates who apply.

Decision making is usually a part of the problem-solving process. Groups that have a problem to solve usually must identify several possible solutions and decide on the one that best resolves the problem. Although all group problem solving involves making decisions, not all group decision making solves a problem.

Study Groups—As a student, you are no doubt familiar with **study groups**. The main goal of these groups is to gather information and learn new ideas. We have already noted that one advantage of participating in a group is that you learn by being involved in a discussion. A study group also has the advantage of having access to more information and a wider variety of ideas through the contributions of different individuals.

Therapy Groups—A **therapy group**, also called an encounter group, support group, or T-group, helps group members work on personal problems or provides encouragement and support to help manage stress. Such groups are led by professionals who are trained to help members overcome, or at least manage, individual problems in a group setting. Group therapy takes advantage of the self-understanding that members gain as they communicate with one another. Members also learn how they are perceived by others. Groups such as WW (formerly known as Weight Watchers) and Alcoholics Anonymous also provide positive reinforcement when members have achieved their goals. By experiencing therapy with others, members take advantage of the greater knowledge and information available to the group.

Committees—A **committee** is a group of people who are elected or appointed for a specific task. Some committees are formed to solve problems; others are appointed to make a decision or simply to gather information so that another group, team, or committee can make a decision. A committee may be either a **standing committee**, which remains active for an extended time period, or an **ad hoc committee**, which disbands when its special task has been completed. Like many other people, you may react negatively to serving on a committee. Committee work is often regarded as time consuming, tedious, and ineffective. Perhaps you have heard that "a committee is a way of postponing a decision" or "a committee is a group of people who individually can do nothing and who collectively decide nothing can be done." Although frustration with committees is commonplace, you are not doomed to have a negative experience when working with others on a committee.

Focus Groups—A **focus group** is a small group of people who are asked to focus on a particular topic or issue so that others can better understand the group's responses to the topic or issue presented. One person usually serves as moderator, and this person asks open-ended questions and then simply listens to the responses of the group members. Many advertising agencies show new advertising campaigns to focus groups and then listen to the responses of the group members to assess the impact or effectiveness of the campaign.

WRITING PROMPT

Primary and Secondary Groups

Identify examples of primary and secondary groups with which you interact. What are the functions or goals of the secondary groups to which you belong?

▶ The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

1.5: Communicating in Virtual Groups

OBJECTIVE: Use methods to make virtual group meetings effective

With today's technological advances, people can work together even when they are in different physical locations.[91] In **virtual small group communication**, three or more people collaborate from different physical locations, perform interdependent tasks, have shared responsibility for the outcome of the work, and rely on some form of technology to communicate with one another.[92] Although technology seems to be a pervasive and revolutionary fact of life—in both our personal and our professional lives—communication researchers predict that technology will play an even larger role in how we collaborate with one another in the future.[93] Evidence suggests that although virtual groups can usually perform just as effectively as face-to-face groups, we don't always enjoy the work as much as we do when we are collaborating live and in person.[94] Research also suggests that virtual groups need special support in place to help them manage individual differences and operate at peak effectiveness.[95]

1.5.1 Compare virtual and non-virtual collaboration

1.5.2 Apply theories to virtual groups

1.5.3 Determine methods to make virtual group meetings beneficial for the participants

1.5.1: Differences between Virtual and Non-virtual Collaboration

OBJECTIVE: Compare virtual and non-virtual collaboration

Although virtual and non-virtual collaboration reflects elements common to all group collaboration, there are clear distinctions.

Virtual versus Non-virtual Collaboration

How does virtual group collaboration differ from live, face-to-face meetings?

Time—Virtual collaboration with others can occur in four conditions: (1) same time/same place; (2) same time/different place; (3) different time/same place; and (4) different time/different place.[96]

An **asynchronous message** is not read, heard, or seen at the same time you send the message; that is, there is a time delay between when you send and receive a message. Examples are sending a text message to someone who is not monitoring Facebook and leaving a voice message.

Synchronous messages occur instantly and simultaneously, with no time delay between sending and receiving a message. The more synchronous our interaction, the more similar it is to face-to-face interactions. The more a technology resembles a face-to-face conversation, the more social presence there is. A live video conference is an example.

Social presence is the feeling we have when we act and think as if we're involved in an unmediated, face-to-face conversation. Even in face-to-face interactions, sound takes time to travel, but that "delay" is really imperceptible. When we send text messages back and forth or instant-message with a group of people, we create a shared sense of social or psychological presence with our collaborators.

Varying Degrees of Anonymity—Maybe you've seen the now-classic cartoon of a dog sitting at a computer, speaking the tagline "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." Being able to contribute to a group and knowing that other group members may not know who you are can be liberating and make you feel freer to share ideas with others. Anonymity may lead you to say things that are bolder, more honest, or even more outrageous than if your collaborators knew who you were. At the same time, it may also be easier

for a group member not to contribute to the conversation because there is no accountability for who says what.

Potential for Deception—Anonymity may tempt you and other group members to say things that aren't true. With many forms of virtual communication (such as text messages), when you can't see or hear others, it's easier to lie. A survey of college students found that 40 percent had lied on the Internet: 15 percent lied about their age, 8 percent about their weight, 6 percent about their appearance, 6 percent about their marital status, and 3 percent about what sex they were.[97] Another study found that almost 90 percent of people have been less than truthful about their appearance when online at one time or another.[98]

Nonverbal Messages—Words and graphics become more important when you are collaborating virtually rather than face-to-face because when texting or e-mailing, you must rely solely on them to carry nonverbal cues. Of course, a YouTube video does include nonverbal messages—but even on YouTube some cues may be limited, such as the surrounding context and reactions from others.

Some researchers have found that trust takes longer to develop in virtual forms of communication because team members can't see one another. Since visual cues provide confirmation of verbal messages, without seeing other members, trust may emerge only slowly.[99]

For example, some basic ways to add emotion to text messages include CAPITALIZING THE MESSAGE (which is considered "yelling"), making letters bold, inserting graphics, and using emoticons or emojis. In face-to-face communication, we laugh, smile, or frown in direct response to what others are saying. We use emoticons/emojis to provide the same kind of emotional punctuation in our written message.[100] Also, the ability to tease or make sarcastic remarks is limited when using text messages. Because the written message lacks a tone of voice, emoticons help provide information about the intended emotional tone. You can also write out an accompanying interpretation—for example, "What a kook you are! (just kidding)"—to compensate for the limits of emotional cues.

Written Messages—Reliance on the written word also affects virtual collaborations. One online scholar suggests that a person's typing ability and writing skills affect the quality of any relationship that is developed.[101] Not everyone has the ability to encode thoughts quickly and accurately into written words. Writing skills affect your ability to express yourself online, and how others perceive you. Your written messages provide cues to others about your personality, skills, sense of humor, and even your values.

Distance—Although we certainly can collaborate virtually with people who live and work in the same building, there is typically greater physical distance between people who

are communicating virtually. When using the Internet or a cell phone, we can just as easily send a text or video message to someone on the other side of the globe as we can to someone on the other side of the room.

1.5.2: Virtual Group Theories

OBJECTIVE: Apply theories to virtual groups

Three theories have been developed that further explain and predict how we use electronic meeting systems. The role of nonverbal messages is an integral part of each of these theories. Understanding the various theoretical approaches can help you better fulfill the role and function of the virtual groups in which you participate.

CUES-FILTERED-OUT THEORY   One early theory of communication via the Internet was the **cues-filtered-out theory**. This theory suggests that emotional expression is severely restricted when we communicate using only text messages; the nonverbal cues such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice are filtered out. The assumption was that text messages were best used for brief, task-oriented

messages such as sharing information or asking questions; they were assumed to be less effective in helping people establish meaningful relationships or in solving more complex problems.[102] This theory also suggests that because of the lack of nonverbal cues and other social information, we are less likely to use text-based electronic messages to manage relationships. Although using Facebook may include photos, videos, and ample personal information, it's still not as rich as a face-to-face conversation.

MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY   Another theory helps us predict which form of media we would use, depending on the richness required to convey messages, especially emotional and relational ones. **Media richness theory** suggests that the richness of a communication channel is based on four criteria:

1. The amount of feedback that the communicators can receive
2. The number of cues that the channel can convey and that can be interpreted by a receiver
3. The variety of language that communicators use
4. The potential for expressing emotions and feelings[103]

Using these four criteria, researchers have developed a continuum of communication channels, from "communication rich" to "communication lean." As illustrated in Figure 1-1,[104] face-to-face conversation is the most media rich, and simply posting an announcement or a flyer is the most media lean.

Some evidence indicates that those wishing to communicate a negative message, such as ending a relationship, may select a less-rich communication message: They may be more likely to send a letter or an e-mail rather than share the bad news face to face.[105] Similarly, people usually want to share good news in person, where they can enjoy the positive reaction. Both the cues-filtered-out theory and the media richness theory suggest that the

Figure 1-1 A Continuum of Media-Rich to Media-Lean Message Sources

A Continuum of Media-Rich to Media-Lean Message Sources	
Face-to-face, one-on-one discussion	Media rich
Face-to-face group meetings	
Video-conference	
Telephone conversation	
Computer conference (interactive e-mail)	
Voice mail	
Noninteractive e-mail	
Fax	
Personal letter	
Impersonal memo	
Posted flyer or announcement	Media Lean

restriction of nonverbal cues, which provide information about the nature of the relationship, hampers the quality of relationships that can be established virtually. A newer perspective, however, suggests that eventually we may be able to discern relational information when collaborating virtually.

SOCIAL INFORMATION-PROCESSING THEORY   **Social information-processing theory** suggests that we can communicate relational and emotional messages via the Internet, but it may take longer to express messages that are typically communicated using facial expressions and tone of voice. A key difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication is the rate at which information reaches you. During a live, in-person conversation, you process a lot of information quickly—the words you hear as well as the many nonverbal cues you see (facial expression, gestures, and body posture) and hear (tone of voice and the use of pauses). During text-only interactions, less information is available to process (no audio cues or visual nonverbal expressions), so it takes a bit longer for the relationship to develop—but it does develop as you learn more about your e-mail partner's likes, dislikes, and feelings.

Social information-processing theory also suggests that if you expect to communicate with your electronic communication partner again, you are likely to pay more attention to the relationship cues—expressions of emotions that are communicated either directly (such as someone writing, "I'm feeling bored in this meeting today") or indirectly (such as when you write a long e-mail message and your e-mail collaborator writes back only a sentence, suggesting he or she may not want to spend much time "talking" today).

A study by Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther extended the application of social information-processing theory. They investigated the effects on computer-mediated communication on how much information people reveal about themselves, how quickly they reveal it, and the overall impressions people get of one another. In comparing computer-mediated exchanges with face-to-face conversations, Tidwell and Walther found that people in computer-mediated "conversations" asked more direct questions, which resulted in people revealing more, not less, information about themselves when online.[106]

If you expect to communicate with your electronic partner again, evidence also suggests that you will pay more attention to the relationship cues that develop. In one study, Joseph Walther and Judee Burgoon found that the development of relationships between people who meet face to face differed little from those between people who had computer-mediated interactions.[107] In fact, they found that many computer-mediated groups actually developed more satisfying relationships compared to the face-to-face groups.

1.5.3: Strategies for Participating in Virtual Groups

OBJECTIVE: **Determine methods to make virtual group meetings beneficial for the participants**

It's one thing to understand how virtual group collaboration is different from collaborating face to face, and to understand different theoretical approaches to virtual collaboration. On a practical level, it will help you to know the dos and don'ts of collaborating virtually.

PARTICIPATING IN VIRTUAL GROUPS   Two researchers recommend the following best practices, which can enhance virtual team success:[108]

- **Start early.** It takes longer to develop relationships when participating in virtual teams.

- **Communicate often.** The messages need not be lengthy, but more frequent message exchanges let other group members know you're still involved and connected.[109]

- **Multitask skillfully.** Teams can work on more than one task at a time by dividing and conquering the work. It's okay to make assignments and have different team members working on different parts of the project all at the same time.

- **Respond to others' messages.** Overtly acknowledge that you have read another person's message.

- **Use technology skillfully.** Effectively use the tools and technology for collaborating virtually. If you don't know how to use the technology, ask for help.[110]

- **Be clear.** People can't guess what you're thinking because they may not be able to see you, so spell out what you think and feel when writing e-mail or text messages.

- **Be flexible.** Sometimes virtual group members need a quick response; at other times they may need more detailed information that will take longer to develop. When sending a message to the group, consider the needs of group members for information.[111]

- **Set deadlines.** Team members should be given clear, specific due dates, and they should report whether they are meeting them.

LEADING VIRTUAL GROUPS   If you are in a leadership role and are encouraging others to collaborate virtually, you can take several steps to support a virtual group. Specifically, the following types of assistance seem to help virtual teams function best:[112]

- **Provide the right resources.** Teams need adequate resources, such as the right people, adequate time to do the work, and enough money to buy what they need to get the job done.

- **Provide technology training.** Team members should be appropriately trained in using the technology to stay connected.

- **Provide good tech support.** Make sure team members aren't slowed down by ineffective technology. It's important that team members have someone who can help them use the technology effectively—especially when the technology doesn't work or breaks down.

- **Openly reward and compliment team members.** Make sure team members feel valued.

- **Ensure effective communication skill.** Team members should have appropriate training in communication skills, technical skills, customer service skills, and in how to collaborate from remote locations.

In practice, working in a virtual group may reveal several underlying challenges that need to be managed, as illustrated in the following case study.

To help you determine whether your group is using the best practices for communicating in a virtual group, use the assessment instrument in the following Virtual Collaboration sidebar.

CASE STUDY

The Battle over Working as a Virtual Group

It seemed simple enough. Their history professor had divided the class into groups of five or six people to present an oral report to the class about the Civil War. Each group had an assigned topic. Although some class time was devoted to the project, the professor assumed that the groups would also spend out-of-class time to collaborate on the report. The problem was that the members of the group assigned to cover the Battle of Appomattox all had part-time jobs, two members had busy lives as parents, and another member commuted to campus an hour away. After comparing their schedules, it was obvious they would have difficulty finding a time when they could all get together.

The group members decided that rather than meeting face to face, they would connect outside class via the Internet. Although the professor wanted them to meet in person, the group just didn't see how that was possible. So they exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers, established a collaborative Google Docs space, and agreed to share information virtually. They found, however, that it was tricky to make much progress. A couple of the group members weren't clear about the goal of the assignment and just waited for others to start sharing information to see what the group project was all about. Because of a heavy workload, another member just didn't have time to devote to the project and didn't seem very committed to the group. Two members started sharing their research findings with the entire group—but when they realized they were the only two doing the work, they stopped volunteering to share their information with the group and shared their work just with each other. One of the top-performing group members started criticizing the group members who weren't doing their fair share of the work. The criticism didn't do much for the group's climate. Soon members were spending more time complaining about their colleagues than they were working on the project.

At the midway point, the group wasn't making much progress. Something needed to be done to get the group back on track or they were going to present an oral report that would not only be embarrassingly bad, but also significantly lower their course grades. The professor scheduled one more in-class meeting and announced that the rest of the time the groups would have to meet on their own. The Battle of Appomattox group sensed disaster looming. Mistrust and inaction on the project were increasing.

WRITING PROMPT

Question for Analysis—The Battle over Working as a Virtual Group

Identify the key problems this group is having. What should they focus on when they have their in-class meeting? What could they do differently to function as a more effective team? Provide specific recommendations to get the group back on track.

▶   The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

   Submit

Virtual Collaboration

Assessing Virtual Group Practice

Survey: Assessing Virtual Group Practice

Use the following assessment instrument to help you determine whether a virtual group you belong to is operating at peak efficiency.[113]

    1 = Always;
    2 = Sometimes;
    3 = Never;
    N/A = Not Applicable.

1. Our group meets face to face, especially early in our group's history, to establish procedures and rules that structure how we will interact virtually.	1	2	3	N/A
2. Our group sends frequent messages to the entire group.	1	2	3	N/A
3. Our group sends frequent messages to individual group members.	1	2	3	N/A
4. Our group has divided the overall task into smaller tasks.	1	2	3	N/A
5. Our group has assigned group members to specific tasks linked to achieving the group's goal.	1	2	3	N/A
6. Our group acknowledges receiving electronic messages from one another.	1	2	3	N/A
7. Our group develops clear, brief messages that are usually understood by other group members.	1	2	3	N/A
8. Our group sets deadlines.	1	2	3	N/A
9. Our group meets deadlines.	1	2	3	N/A
10. Our group members understand and appropriately use technology to help us stay connected.	1	2	3	N/A

Summary

The lower the score (out of a possible 30 points), the more likely it is that your virtual group is collaborating well. If you answered "never" (a high score of 3 points) to a statement, consider the following suggestions:

High-Score Feedback for Question 1: Start early and meet face-to-face if/when possible. It takes longer to develop relationships when participating in virtual teams.

High-Score Feedback for Question 2: The messages to the entire team need not be lengthy, but more frequent message exchanges let other group members know you're still involved and connected.

High-Score Feedback for Question 3: The messages to individual team members need not be lengthy, but more frequent message exchanges let other group members know you're still involved and connected.

High-Score Feedback for Question 4: Your group can work on more than one task at a time by dividing and conquering the work.

High-Score Feedback for Question 5: Your group can make assignments and have different team members working on different parts of the project at the same time.

High-Score Feedback for Question 6: Overtly acknowledge that you have read another person's message.

High-Score Feedback for Question 7: Be clear. People can't guess what you're thinking because they may not be able to see you, so spell out what you think and feel when writing e-mail or text messages.

High-Score Feedback for Question 8: Team members should be given clear, specific due dates.

High-Score Feedback for Question 9: Have team members report whether they are meeting their deadlines.

High-Score Feedback for Question 10: Effectively use the tools and technology for collaborating virtually. If you don't know how to use the technology, ask for help.

1.6: Communicating Competently in Small Groups

OBJECTIVE: Describe competencies of small group communication

A number of principles and skills can enhance your competence as a member of a small group. You may be wondering, "Precisely what does a competent communicator do?" A **competent group communicator** is a person who is able to interact appropriately and effectively with others in small groups and teams. Communication researcher Michael Mayer found that the two most important behaviors of group members were (1) fully participating in the discussion, especially when analyzing a problem, and (2) offering encouraging, supportive comments to others.[114] Stated succinctly: Participate and be nice.

Researchers who have studied how to enhance communication competence suggest that three elements are involved in becoming a truly competent communicator:

1. You must be motivated.
2. You must have appropriate knowledge.
3. You must have the skill to act appropriately.[115]

Motivation is an internal drive to achieve a goal. To be motivated means you have a strong desire to do your best, even during inevitable periods of fatigue and frustration. If you are motivated to become a competent small group communicator, you probably have an understanding of the benefits or advantages of working with others in groups.

Knowledge is the information you need to do competently what needs to be done. One key purpose of this text is to give you knowledge that can help you become a more competent communicator in groups, on teams, and during the many meetings you will undoubtedly attend in the future.

A **skill** is an effective behavior that can be repeated when appropriate. Just having the desire to be effective (motivation) or being able to rattle off lists of principles and theories (knowledge) doesn't ensure that you will be competent; you have to have the skill to put the principles into practice. The subtitle of this text—*Principles and Practices*—emphasizes the importance of being able to translate into action what you know and think.

Research supports the commonsense conclusion that practicing group communication skills, especially when you practice the skills in a group or team setting, enhances your group performance.[116]

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

1.6.1 Describe two problem-oriented, three solution-oriented, two discussion-management, and two relational group problem-solving competencies

1.6.2 Identify attributes of ethical small group communication

1.6.1: Nine Core Competencies of Group Communication

OBJECTIVE: Describe two problem-oriented, three solution-oriented, two discussion-management, and two relational group problem-solving competencies

Although we've described the personal qualities of competent group or team members, you may still be wondering, "What specifically do effective group members do?" Following is an overview of some of the competencies that are essential for members of problem-solving groups. It's important to emphasize that this overview targets problem-solving discussions. To solve a problem or to achieve a goal, you must seek to overcome an obstacle. There is more communication research about how to solve problems and make effective decisions in small groups and teams than on any other topic.

These nine competencies were identified after examining several bodies of research and consulting with several instructors of small group communication.[117] They are grouped into four categories.

PROBLEM-ORIENTED COMPETENCIES

- **Define the problem.** Effective group members clearly and appropriately define or describe the problem to be solved and the obstacles to be overcome. Ineffective group members either define the problem inaccurately or make little or no attempt to clarify the problem or issues confronting the group.

- **Analyze the problem.** Effective group members offer statements that clearly and appropriately examine the causes, history, symptoms, and significance of the problem to be solved. Ineffective members either don't analyze the problem or they do so inaccurately or inappropriately.

SOLUTION-ORIENTED COMPETENCIES

- **Identify criteria.** Effective group members offer clear and appropriate comments that identify the goal that the group is attempting to achieve or identify specific criteria (or standards) for an acceptable solution or outcome for the problem facing the group. Ineffective group members don't clarify the goal or establish criteria for solving the problem. Ineffective groups aren't sure what they are looking for in a solution or outcome.

- **Generate solutions.** Effective group members offer several possible solutions or strategies to overcome obstacles or decision options regarding the issues confronting the group. Ineffective group members offer fewer solutions, or they rush to make a decision without considering other options or before defining and analyzing the problem.

- **Evaluate solutions.** Effective group members systematically evaluate the pros and cons of the solutions that are proposed. Ineffective group members examine neither the positive and negative consequences nor the benefits and potential costs of a solution or decision.

DISCUSSION-MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES
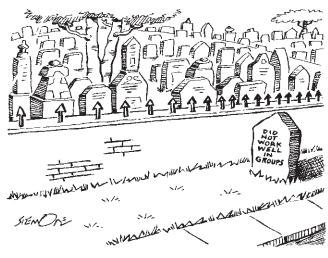
- **Maintain task focus.** Effective group members stay on track and keep their focus on the task at hand. Although almost every group wanders off track from time to time, the most effective groups are mindful of their goal and sensitive to completing the work before them. Effective group members also summarize what the group is discussing to keep the group oriented. Ineffective group members have difficulty staying on track and frequently digress from the issues at hand. They also seldom summarize what the group has done, which means that group members aren't quite sure what they are accomplishing.

- **Manage interaction.** Effective group members don't monopolize the conversation; rather, they actively look for ways to draw quieter members into the discussion. Neither are they too quiet; they contribute their fair share of information and look for ways to keep the discussion from becoming a series of monologues; they encourage on-task, supportive dialogue. Ineffective group members either rarely contribute to the discussion or monopolize the discussion by talking too much.

They also make little effort to draw others into the conversation and are not sensitive to the need for balanced interaction among group members.

RELATIONAL COMPETENCIES

- **Manage conflict.** Conflict occurs in the best of groups. Effective group members are sensitive to differences of opinion and personal conflict, and they actively seek to manage the conflict by focusing on issues, information, and evidence rather than on personalities. Ineffective group members deal with conflict by making it personal; they are insensitive to the feelings of others and generally focus on personalities at the expense of issues.

- **Maintain a positive climate.** Effective group members look for opportunities to support and encourage other group members.[118] Although they may not agree with all comments made, they actively seek ways to improve the climate and maintain positive relationships with other group members through both verbal and nonverbal expressions of support. Ineffective group members do just the opposite: They are critical of others, and their frowning faces and strident voices nonverbally cast a gloomy pall over the group. Ineffective members rarely use appropriate humor to lessen any tension between members.

Communicating effectively in small groups and teams involves a variety of competencies. Even as we present these nine competencies, we are not suggesting that they are the only things you need to learn. Instead, they represent a practical beginning to learning the essentials of communicating in small group problem solving and decision making.

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Your Small Group Communication Competencies

Based on the description of the nine core small group competencies, rate your skill in using these competencies in a group or a team on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high).

Core Competencies	Your Rating
Define the problem	
Analyze the problem	
Identify criteria	
Generate solutions	
Evaluate solutions	
Maintain task force	
Manage interaction	
Manage conflict	
Maintain a positive climate	

Summary: In which core competencies did you score the highest? The lowest? Identify the competencies where you have the most room for improvement, and review the above descriptions of the competencies to note how you can become a more effective group member in these areas. At the end of the course, take this survey again and compare the results with your earlier results. Which areas show improvement?

1.6.2: Ethically Communicating in Small Groups

OBJECTIVE: **Identify attributes of ethical small group communication.**

Each of the nine group communication competencies is founded on the assumption that to be a competent communicator, you must be an ethical communicator. **Ethics** are the beliefs, values, and moral principles by which we determine what is right and what is wrong. Ethical principles are the basis for many of the decisions we make in our personal and professional lives. Among the attributes of an ethical small group communicator are listening to others, using evidence to support key ideas, sharing information honestly and truthfully, and doing an appropriate share of the work to contribute to the group goal. Throughout this text we will be spotlighting the importance of being an ethical group communicator in a feature we call Ethical Collaboration Each one poses an ethical question or dilemma

and then invites you to consider the most ethical course of action to take. The first one immediately appears in the following section.

In the classic book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum suggested that while he was in kindergarten he mastered the basics of getting along with others and accomplishing tasks effectively. This text is designed to add to what you learned in kindergarten and later, so you can become a valued member of the groups to which you belong.

Ethical Collaboration

Is It Okay to Borrow Research?

Your underlying ethical principles are like your computer's operating system, which is always on when you are working with other programs on your computer. How you interact with others is based on your underlying assumptions and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways to treat others.

Suppose you found yourself in the following situation. Your group communication instructor has assigned all students to small groups to work on a semester-long group project. One member of your group has a friend who took the course last semester with a different instructor. He suggests that your group select the same discussion topic that his friend had so that the group could benefit from the research already gathered by his friend's group. Your group can also do some original research to build on the previous group's research, but you will rely heavily on the information already collected.

WRITING PROMPT

Original versus Borrowed Research

Consider the preceding scenario. Is it ethical to use the work of another group in this situation? Are there any conditions that would make it more ethical to use the work of the previous group? Even if the group you're in gathers additional research, is it appropriate to "borrow" heavily from the work already completed by others, especially if the goal is to learn how to conduct original research?

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Summary: Group Principles and Practices

1.1: Communicating in Small Groups

- Small group communication is communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.

- The nine group communication competencies are define the problem, analyze the problem, identify criteria, generate solutions, evaluate solutions, maintain task focus, manage interaction, manage conflict, and maintain climate.

1.2: Communicating in Teams

- A team is a coordinated group of individuals organized to work together so as to achieve a specific, common goal.
- The key elements that make a team effective are a clear, elevating goal; a results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; a collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership.
- Effective team members are experienced, skilled problem-solvers, who are open to new ideas, supportive, positive, action oriented, and adaptive.
- Teams differ in important ways from groups. In a group, goals may be general, roles and responsibilities are not always explicitly defined, rules and expectations often develop informally and evolve according to the group's needs, group members interact, and work may be divided among group members. By contrast, teams have a clear, elevating goal that drives all aspects of team accomplishment; roles and responsibilities are explicitly developed; rules and operating procedures are clearly developed; team members collaborate and discuss how to coordinate their efforts; and teams work together interdependently.

1.3: Communicating Collaboratively in Groups: Advantages and Disadvantages

- Working in groups has the following advantages: more information, more creative problem solving, improved learning, more satisfied members, members' ability to learn about themselves.
- Working in groups has some disadvantages, too: Members may pressure others to conform, the group could be dominated by one person, members may rely on others and not do their part, and group work takes more time than individual work.

1.4: Communicating in Different Types of Groups

- Primary groups include family groups and social groups, a group whose main purpose is to give people a way to fulfill their need to associate with others.
- Secondary groups exist to accomplish a task or achieve a goal.

1.5: Communicating in Virtual Groups

- Virtual small group communication consists of three or more people who collaborate from different physical locations, perform interdependent tasks, have shared responsibility for the outcome of the work, and rely on some form of technology to communicate with one another.
- Methods of virtual collaboration include the telephone, e-mail, video, and the use of electronic meeting systems.

1.6: Communicating Competently in Small Groups

- Problem-oriented competencies include defining and analyzing the problem.
- Solution-oriented competencies include identifying criteria, generating solutions, and evaluating solutions.
- Discussion-management competencies include maintaining task focus and managing interactions.
- Relational competencies include managing conflict and maintaining a positive climate.

Chapter 2
Understanding Small Group Communication Theory

"To despise theory is to have the excessively vain pretension to do without knowing what one does, and to speak without knowing what one says."
—Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle

⌄ Learning Objectives

2.1 Explain how people use theory to make sense of themselves and the world

2.2 Create a systemic explanation using theory

2.3 Relate theory to the sense-making function of small group communication

2.4 Differentiate between major theories of group communication

2.5 Apply theory to group communication

We encounter theories every day. Evolution, climate change, the "Big Bang"—all of these may be discussed and evaluated in classrooms, in our daily conversations, in newscasts, and in political debates. When we view crime dramas, fictitious detectives develop theories of crimes as we follow along and try to predict outcomes. But few of us take the time to think about what theories actually do for us.

Where do they come from? How are they built? What are they good for?

Many of today's students are interested in relevant, practical knowledge, and sometimes they assume that theory is neither relevant nor practical. In truth, theory is very practical. Theorizing helps to explain or predict the events in people's lives; it is a very basic form of human activity.[1]

People theorize on a rudimentary level when they reflect on the past and make decisions based on these reflections. **Theory** is a set of interrelated facts, observations, and ideas that explains or predicts something. Theory, then, has two basic functions: to explain and to predict.

2.1: The Nature of Theory and the Theory-Building Process

OBJECTIVE: **Explain how people use theory to make sense of themselves and the world**

Theories are useful in our everyday lives. Suppose, for example, that you do your weekly grocery shopping every Thursday after your late-afternoon class. When you arrive at the store, you are pleased to see that several checkout lanes are open, with no one waiting at any of them. You say, "I'll be out of here soon." You proceed up one aisle and down the next. To your dismay, you notice that each time you pass the checkout lanes, the lines have grown a bit longer. By the time you fill your cart, at least six people are waiting in each lane. You now have a 20-minute wait at the checkout.

If the situation just described were to occur once, you would probably curse your luck or chalk it up to fate. But if you find that the same events occur each time you visit the market, you might begin to see a consistency in your observations that goes beyond luck or fate. In noticing this consistency, you have taken the first step in building a theory: You have observed a phenomenon. In other words, you have witnessed a repeated pattern of events for which you believe there must be some explanation. So you ponder the situation. In your mind you organize all the facts available to you: the time of your arrival, the condition of the checkout lanes when you enter the store each time, and the length of the lines when you complete your shopping. You discover that you arrive at the store at approximately 4:45 each afternoon and reach the checkout lanes about 25 minutes later. You conclude that between the time you arrive and the time you depart, thousands of workers head for home, some of them stopping off at the store on the way. Voilà—you have a theory. You have organized your information to explain the phenomenon.

Assuming that your theory is accurate, it is now very useful for you. Having explained the phenomenon, you may now reasonably predict that under the same set of circumstances, the phenomenon will recur. In other words, if you continue to do your weekly shopping after your late afternoon class on Thursday, you will repeatedly be faced with long checkout lines. Given this knowledge, you can adapt your behavior accordingly, perhaps by doing your shopping earlier or later in the day.

2.1.1: Theory and Self-Concept

OBJECTIVE: **Outline the process of forming a theory as it relates to self-concept**

On a more personal level, your theory about yourself—your **self-concept**—influences the choices you make throughout the day. Your self-concept emerges as a consequence of your interactions with others, starting with your caregivers from childhood. You behave, others respond to you, and you observe their responses. You formulate your self-concept based on the reflected appraisals of others. You tend to behave consistently (predictably) with your self-concept. In essence, this self-concept, or "self-theory," serves to explain you to yourself, thereby allowing you to predict your behavior and to successfully select realistic goals. This is theory at its most personal and pervasive.

2.1.2: Theory and Group Communication

OBJECTIVE: **Relate theory to group communication**

Theory building is a common, natural process. You notice consistencies in your experience and examine relationships among the consistencies. You then build an explanation of the phenomenon that allows you to predict future events and, in some cases, to exercise some control over situations. Some theories, of course, are very elaborate and formal, but even in these cases the fundamental features of explanation and prediction can be seen. George Kelly's definition of theory refers to these features:

> A theory may be considered as a way of binding together a multitude of facts so that one may comprehend them all at once. When the theory enables us to make reasonably precise predictions, one may call it scientific.[2]

Theory is crucial to the study of group communication. The explanatory power of good theory helps make sense of the processes involved when people interact with others in a group. The predictive precision of theory allows people to anticipate probable outcomes of various types of communicative behavior in the group. Armed with this type of knowledge, people can adjust their own communicative behavior to help make group work more effective and rewarding.

WRITING PROMPT

Informal Theories

Make a list of informal theories you have about an ordinary day (Professor X is boring, I'm afraid of speaking in class, and so on). On what basis did you formulate these theories? How do they affect your behavior? What might cause you to alter them? Write a brief response addressing these questions.

▶ | The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

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2.2: Theory as a Practical Approach to Group Communication

OBJECTIVE: **Create a systemic explanation using theory**

Theory, both formal and informal, helps us make intelligent decisions about how to conduct ourselves. Working in small groups is no exception. Everyone brings a set of theories to small group meetings—theories about oneself (self-concept), about other group members, and about groups in general. While participating in the group, we regulate our behavior according to these theories. We behave in ways consistent with our self-concepts. We relate to others in the group according to our previous impressions (theories) of them. If we believe (theorize) that groups are essentially ineffectual—that "a camel is a horse designed by committee" or that "if you really want something done, do it yourself"—then we probably will act accordingly and reinforce that belief. Conversely, if we come to the group having learned that groups are capable of working effectively, we will behave very differently and contribute much more to the group's effectiveness.

▼   **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

2.2.1 **Explain how theory helps a group determine its needs**

2.2.2 **Describe how a theory helps a group achieve its goals**

2.2.1: Explanatory Function

OBJECTIVE: **Explain how theory helps a group determine its needs**

To be practical, theories of small group communication must suggest ways in which participants can make group discussion more efficient and rewarding. The **explanatory function**

of theory is important in this regard. If we understand why some groups are effective whereas others are not, or why certain styles of leadership are appropriate in some situations but not in others, then we are better prepared to diagnose the needs of our own groups. The explanatory function of theory leads us to understand group dynamics. Understanding is the first critical step in improving group process.

We commonly use theories to explain and predict. When are the best times to shop if we wish to avoid long lines? Understanding is the first critical step.

2.2.2: Predictive Function

OBJECTIVE: **Describe how a theory helps a group achieve its goals**

In medicine, a diagnosis is not helpful unless it suggests a course of treatment. Nevertheless, diagnosis—explanation—is a necessary first step. Understanding the process suggests ways of improving the process; therein lies the usefulness of the **predictive function** of theory. By understanding a specific group and group communication in general, and by being aware of possible alternative behaviors, you can use theory to select behaviors that will help you achieve the goal of your group. In other words, if you can reasonably predict that certain outcomes will follow certain types of communication, you can regulate your behavior to achieve the most desirable results. For example, predictions about time—such as how much time a task will take—that are made through group discussion tend to be more optimistic than predictions made by individuals in the group, probably because of the assumption that "many hands make light work." This tendency may lead to unrealistic time estimates and failure to meet deadlines. If you are a leader or a member of a group or team facing such a situation, knowledge of this tendency can help you to moderate its effect by alerting the group and suggesting that you collectively allocate a little more time for the project at hand.[3]

Some theories presented in this book explain group and team phenomena. These theories are referred to as **process theories**. Other theories, called **method theories**, take a prescriptive approach to small group communication. These how-to theories are particularly useful in establishing formats for solving problems and resolving conflicts in a group. Both types of theories add to the knowledge and skills that can make you a more effective communicator. Central to your effectiveness as a communicator is the ability to use words.

WRITING PROMPT

Theory Building

You have seen how various theories can be applied to ordinary, practical activities. Choose another everyday phenomenon and then build a systematic explanation. Explain which predictions you can make based on your theory.

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> The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

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2.3: Communication as Sense-Making in Small Groups

OBJECTIVE: Relate theory to the sense-making function of small group communication

Communication is the vehicle that allows a group to move toward its goals, and words are the primary tools of communication. A verbal description of a planned new product at a company's board meeting creates a vision of that product for board members. Presented effectively, the description may result in new or changed attitudes and behaviors; the idea may be adopted. Words have the power to create new realities and to change attitudes; they are immensely beneficial tools. Although this may seem obvious, language often goes unnoticed. We spend so much of each day speaking, listening, reading, and writing that language seems simple to us. In truth, it is not. Through language, we unravel the enormous complexity that characterizes our world. With language, we build the theories that explain the world to ourselves and others.

Human communication is a transactive process by which we make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. Communication organizes and makes sense out of all the sights, sounds, odors, tastes, and sensations we perceive within our environment. As communication scholar Dean Barnlund states, "Communication occurs any time meaning is assigned to an internal or external stimulus."[4] Thus, when people arrive at a meeting room and begin to shiver, the sensation brings to their minds the word "cold." Within themselves, or on an *intrapersonal*

level, they have reduced uncertainty about the nature of an experience: The room is too cold. Giving verbal expression to an experience organizes and clarifies that experience.

"Where are you going with this, Wingate?"
© Nick Downes/Conde Nast Publications/www.cartoonbank.com

At the *interpersonal level* of communication, the sense-making process is even more clearly evident. As you get to know someone, you progressively discover what makes that person unique. By developing an explanation of the person's behavior, you can predict how he or she is likely to respond to future communication and events. You base your predictions on what you know about the person's beliefs, attitudes, values, and personality. In essence, you build a theory that allows you to explain another person's behavior, to predict that person's future responses, and to control your own communicative behavior accordingly. Theories help people make sense of others.

⌄   **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

2.3.1 Identify the six personas involved in one-on-one communication

2.3.2 Describe the complexity involved in group relationships

2.3.1: The Complexity of Getting to Know Someone

OBJECTIVE: Identify the six personas involved in one-on-one communication

Getting to know someone is a process of progressively reducing uncertainty—and a lot of uncertainty exists, especially at the outset of working with others in groups and teams. Think back to your first day at college or to your first day in group communication class. You were probably surrounded by many unfamiliar faces. At times such as these, you may feel tentative or uncertain and think, "What am I doing here?" and "Who are all of these other people?" In the cafeteria line, you encounter a person you find attractive. You say, "Hi! Are you new? What do you think of school so far?" This kind of engagement takes some courage because you don't know what kind of response you will get. So you hesitate. You make

small talk and look for signs in the other person's behavior that might indicate whether that person desires further communication. You communicate, observe the response, and base your subsequent communication on your interpretation of that response. This is a complex process, particularly because both you and the other person must communicate, observe, respond, and interpret simultaneously!

The complexity of the process creates uncertainty—a sense of not being able to predict what will happen in the future. The presence of other people always creates uncertainty because you don't know for sure what they will do or say. Many communication theorists have noted that whenever an individual communicates with another person, at least six people are involved:

1. Who you think you are
2. Who you think the other person is
3. Who you think the other person thinks you are
4. Who the other person thinks he or she is
5. Who the other person thinks you are
6. Who the other person thinks you think he or she is
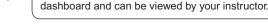
All six of these people influence and are influenced by the communication—a very complex matter indeed.

WRITING PROMPT

Six-Person Conversation

Think of a recent, memorable conversation you had with another person. Briefly describe the conversation and explain who the "six people" were in this conversation.

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2.3.2: The Complexity of Small Group Relationships

OBJECTIVE: Describe the complexity involved in group relationships

Complexity increases dramatically with group size, even when one relationship involves two, not six, people. When eight people interact, literally thousands of factors influence communication and are influenced by it—factors such as "who I think Ted thinks Rosa thinks Amit is" or "who I think Lourdes thinks Tom thinks I am."

Adding to the complexity are group members' thoughts and beliefs about the group itself. For example, considerable research has shown that athletic teams' beliefs about their own ability to perform have a clear effect on actual team outcomes. When researchers artificially manipulate feedback about a team's performance by inaccurately reporting

exceedingly high or low baseline performance, such feedback affects subsequent team performance. Beliefs about the group itself—even when inaccurate—serve to explain, predict, and influence behaviors.[5]

Furthermore, when facing a problem or decision, humans have the unique ability to envision scenarios and eventualities in a variety of ways. Decisions are complex tasks that are not always welcomed by group members, who may view the uncertainty of decision making with apprehension and anticipation of regret.[6] All of these dynamics add to the complexity of small group communication.

Complexity increases with group size.

WRITING PROMPT

Complexity and Diversity in Groups

Complexity increases with group size, but also with the diversity of group members' beliefs and experiences. Examine the photograph above. Which factors do you observe that may add to the complexity of the group's interactions? Imagine a story line that explains what is happening in the picture. Which additional factors can you imagine that might influence the interactions among group members? Based on these factors, what do you think will be likely positive or negative outcomes for the group? Why?

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2.4: Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of Group Communication

OBJECTIVE: Differentiate between major theories of group communication

Small group communication theory attempts to explain and predict group and team phenomena. Given the complexity of the process and the number of variables that

affect small group communication, no single theory can possibly account for all the variables involved, nor can one theory systematically relate the variables to one another. Therefore, a number of approaches to group communication theory have emerged in recent years. Each seeks to explain and predict group behavior while focusing on different facets of the group process. We will briefly introduce five broad theoretical perspectives that provide fairly holistic approaches:

1. Systems theory
2. Social exchange theory
3. Symbolic convergence theory
4. Structuration theory
5. Functional theory

⌄   **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

2.4.1 **Describe the elements of systems theory**

2.4.2 **Outline a social exchange according to social exchange theory**

2.4.3 **Apply symbolic convergence theory to group interaction**

2.4.4 **Explain how structuration theory applies to groups**

2.4.5 **Identify functional group relationships that lead to better problem solving**

2.4.1: Systems Theory

OBJECTIVE: Describe the elements of systems theory

Perhaps the most prevalent approach to small group communication is **systems theory**. This theory is popular because it is flexible enough to encompass the vast array of variables that influence group and team interaction.

One way to approach the concept of a system is to think of your own body. The various organs make up systems (digestive, nervous, circulatory) that, in turn, make up the larger system (your body). Each organ depends on the proper functioning of other organs, because a change in one part of the system causes changes in the rest of the system. Furthermore, the physiological system cannot be isolated from the environment that surrounds it; to maintain the proper functioning of your physiological systems, you must adjust to changes outside your body. A decrease in oxygen at a higher elevation will cause you to breathe more rapidly, a rise in temperature will make you perspire, and so forth. In other words, your body is an open **system** composed of interdependent elements. It receives input from the environment (food, air, water), processes that input (digestion and oxygenation), and produces an output (writing poetry, designing a webpage,

cooking a fabulous dinner). In addition to receiving input, processing input, and producing output, a small group system exhibits the properties of synergy, entropy, and equifinality.

Elements of Systems Theory

Openness to Environment—Groups do not operate in isolation, but rather are affected continually by interactions with the environment. New members may join and existing members may leave; demands from other organizations may alter a group's goals. Even the climate can affect the group's ability to work. For instance, a snowstorm may force cancellation of a meeting or a beautiful day outside can cause minds in a meeting room to drift.

Interdependence—The components of the group process are interrelated, meaning that a change in one component can alter the relationships among all other components. A shift in cohesiveness or composition can change the group's productivity level.[7] The loss of a group member or the addition of a new member may cause a change that ripples throughout the system. **Interdependence** in a small group makes the study of small group communication both fascinating and difficult: None of the variables involved may be understood properly in isolation.[8]

Input Variables—Input variables in the small group system include group members and group resources, such as funds, tools, knowledge, purposes, relationships to other groups or organizations, and the physical environment.[9]

Process Variables—Process variables relate to the procedures that the group follows to reach its goals. Many of these variables are represented in Figure 2-1.

Output Variables—Output variables—the outcomes of the group process—range from solutions and decisions to personal growth and satisfaction.

Synergy—Just as you are more than a composite of your various parts, so groups are more than the sum of their elements. **Synergy** is present when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When individuals form groups, they create something—the group—that didn't exist before; the group is more than the individuals who compose it. In turn, the performance of the group is often superior to the performance of the individuals within it.[10]

Entropy—The measure of randomness or chaos in a system is called **entropy**. Systems tend to decay (their entropy increases) if not balanced by some countervailing force. For example, interpersonal relationships separated by distance tend to cool rapidly, unless maintained actively through visits, text messages, phone calls, and other social media. So, too, groups and teams experience entropy when they don't meet together regularly.

Equifinality—The principle of **equifinality** states that a system's final state may be reached by multiple paths and from different initial states; there is more than one way to reach the goal. This is an inherent characteristic of open systems. Even systems (or groups and teams) that share the same initial conditions can reach very different end states.

Although systems theory does not fully explain small group phenomena, it serves as a useful organizational strategy. It also reminds us that a full understanding of group communication involves the broader contexts or environments in which groups operate.

Small groups can be viewed as open systems encompassing different interdependent variables. Which input and output variables might there be for the group in this photograph?

2.4.2: Social Exchange Theory

OBJECTIVE: **Outline a social exchange according to social exchange theory**

Social exchange theory explains human behavior in terms of their rewards and costs, and their profits and losses. Rewards are pleasurable outcomes associated with particular behaviors; costs include such things as mental effort, anxiety, or even embarrassment.[11] Profit equals rewards minus costs; as long as rewards exceed costs, a relationship remains attractive.

Rewards and costs can take many forms in a group. For example, groups can provide rewards such as fellowship, job satisfaction, achievement, status, and meeting personal needs and goals. At the same time, group work

takes time and effort and may be frustrating—all forms of costs. In one community theater group, participants identified meeting people and the opportunity to perform as the primary rewards, while they saw disorganization, lack of coordination, and time issues as costs.[12] Social exchange theory predicts that as long as rewards exceed costs—that is, as long as group membership is "profitable"—group membership will continue to be attractive. Small group variables such as cohesiveness and productivity are directly related to how rewarding the group experience is to its members. As with all theories discussed in this book, social exchange theory has its limitations. For example, it does not account for the effects of gender and power relationships in groups.[13]

The basics of social exchange theory are useful in their descriptiveness. Keep them in mind as you read the remaining chapters and as you observe working groups.

2.4.3: Symbolic Convergence Theory

OBJECTIVE: **Apply symbolic convergence theory to group interaction**

Symbolic convergence theory describes how groups' identities develop through shared fantasies. If you consider your closest interpersonal relationships, you can probably remember a point at which each relationship took on a life of its own. For example, when you and an acquaintance become friends, the relationship takes on an identity based on your experiences together and your shared stories and visions of those experiences. Perhaps you develop "inside," or private, jokes that have meaning only for the two of you.

Groups take on this kind of shared personality as well. The **symbolic convergence theory** of communication explains how certain types of communication shape a group's identity and culture, which in turn influences other dynamics such as norms, roles, and decision making. Over time, groups develop a collective consciousness replete with shared emotions, motives, and meanings.[14]

FANTASY   This sort of group consciousness evolves as group members share group fantasies or stories. Within

this theory, the term **fantasy** does not have its usual meaning—something not grounded in reality. Rather, it refers to the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's need to make sense of its experience and to anticipate its future.[15] A fantasy is usually introduced as a story that captures the imagination of the group and momentarily takes the group away from the specific issue under discussion. A group fantasy usually deals with real-life people and situations.

In groups, as in almost all forms of human endeavor, we can discern two levels of reality: (1) what actually happens and (2) our interpretations and beliefs about what happens. What remains in our memories and what guides our subsequent behavior is the latter. As an example, suppose you are in a group discussing how to reduce cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty. A group member says, "Hey, did anyone see the *Tonight Show* last night? They had a guy who won the national lying championship. He was so funny. He talked his way into getting photographed with the president of the United States." Another group member chimes in: "Yeah, I saw that. I had an uncle who used to tell whoppers. He once convinced my aunt that he had won a million dollars in the lottery." Yet another group member says, "My brother always plays practical jokes on my mom." Before you know it, the pace of conversation quickens and other group members tell stories about people who love to play practical jokes. A **fantasy theme** consists of the common or related content of the stories the group tells. The fantasy of one group member leads to a **fantasy chain**—a string of connected stories that revolve around a common theme. These fantasy chains help the group develop a shared sense of identity, just as the unique stories and experiences you have with a close friend give your relationship a unique identity. Usually a fantasy chain includes all the elements you would find in any well-told story: conflict, heroes, villains, and a plot that shapes the story.

By being mindful of the fantasies or stories that develop in a group, you can gain insight into what the group values. Some seemingly "off-task" behavior, such as talking about TV programs, movies, or events seemingly unrelated to the group's agenda, can actually be beneficial in giving the group a sense of identity. Noting the common themes of the group's fantasy (such as who the villains are in the stories or who wins or loses in the story) can also give you insight into a group's values and culture. In addition, fantasies may be a way for groups to deal with sensitive issues in an indirect way.

CASE STUDY

How Do You Keep a Group on Task?

You have been appointed to a task force whose purpose is to recommend ways to better integrate students who take mostly online courses with students who commute to the campus as well as resident students. The dean of students is concerned with the dropout rate and hopes that your group will offer positive suggestions that can enhance the college experience for all students.

The committee is composed mostly of juniors and seniors. The dean thinks they have been around long enough to "know the ropes." A majority of group members are traditional undergraduates who live in residence halls. One is a single mother who takes her classes online. As president-elect of next year's sophomore class, you are the youngest of the six committee members. You are also one of the few commuter students on the committee. The chairperson is a graduating senior and an assistant in the residence halls.

You arrive at the first meeting ready to work. You are excited about being a part of a decision-making process that will have a real impact on students' lives. To your dismay, the other members of the group seem to disregard their assignment and spend the meeting discussing the prospects for the basketball team, hardly mentioning the task at hand. You leave the meeting confused but hopeful that the next meeting will be more fruitful. You resolve to take a more active role and to try to steer the next meeting more toward the committee's task.

At the second meeting, you suggest that the committee discuss the assigned problem. Members concur at first, but then make jokes about the futility of retention programs and the administration's propensity to look for new ways to collect more tuition from students. When the chairperson makes no effort to keep the group on track, you feel overwhelmed and bewildered. You know that the dean expects a report within a month.

Questions for Analysis: How Do You Keep a Group on Task?

1. Analyze the situation in this scenario. What are the important components? Differences in status among group members? Other differences? Time constraints? The group's task? What else? How many can you identify? Which of these factors do you think will help you explain the situation, make predictions, and choose the most effective course of action?

2. Use the variables you identified to write a one-paragraph explanation of the situation.

3. Review Section 2.4.2 on social exchange theory. Which costs and rewards (real or potential) can you identify in this situation that might influence participants' behaviors?

4. Consider this group as a system: How would a change in one part of the system affect the other components? For instance, if the dean gives the group three additional months to complete the work, what is likely to happen?

5. If you were really in this situation, what would you do?

By describing how people in groups come to share a common social reality, symbolic convergence theory explains how groups make decisions and make sense of the decision-making process.[16] It points out that groups, like individuals, have unique "personalities," cultures, or identities built on shared symbolic representations related to the group; these cultures evolve through the adoption of fantasy themes or group stories. Just as we try to understand someone's behavior by taking into account "what sort of person he or she is," we must do the same for groups. Reflecting on the stories a group tells, which may seem off the topic, can give you insight into a group's personality, culture, values, and identity.

2.4.4: Structuration Theory

OBJECTIVE: Explain how structuration theory applies to groups

Anthony Giddens offers another contemporary theoretical approach to help us understand how people behave in small groups.[17] This approach has been further advanced by communication researcher Marshall Scott Poole and his colleagues.[18] **Structuration theory** provides a general framework that explains how people structure their groups by making active use of rules and resources. The theory focuses attention on individuals' *behaviors* in groups rather than on the dynamics of groups per se. This process theory is especially useful for explaining change within groups and organizational systems.[19]

Structuration theory involves two key concepts: *systems* and **rules**. "Don't talk while others are talking" and "Don't leave the meeting until the boss says everyone is dismissed" are examples of rules. These rules determine how the group structures itself and performs tasks, and how group members talk to one another.

Every group develops its own set of rules and resources that structure individuals' behaviors within the group. Note the two groups pictured here. How might their rules and resources be different from each other?

Structuration theory suggests that when we join a new group, we use rules we learned in other groups to structure our behavior. For example, when you walked into your first college class, you probably drew on your experiences as a high school student to know how to act. But groups also create their own rules and resources to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate. Over time, you learned that a college class is similar to, but not exactly like, a high school class. You also discovered that different classes have different rules or structure: Some classes have informal rules, whereas others have more formal ones. One teacher may deduct points for being absent; another teacher may not take roll at all. How communication rules are organized is based on factors both internal and external to the group. Structuration theory helps explain why and how groups develop the rules and behavior patterns they adopt. It can be especially useful for understanding group communication within broader organizational cultures,[20] such as how a group of jurors in a trial draws on rules each juror has observed from other juries and from dramatic depictions of jury deliberations.[21]

Skilled Collaboration

Structuration and the Exercise of Free Will

Concepts and theories are useful because they allow us to explain and predict group phenomena and thus give us a measure of control—over our own actions and, to an extent, over group processes and outcomes.

Structuration theory reminds us that groups are not simply the products of external factors: They are composed of individual human beings who think and act and who can intentionally change the course of the group. Forces such as status differences, norms, stress levels, and leadership styles are not absolute, but rather are mediated by the ways group members choose to react to them. This should be obvious, but it's an important point to emphasize. Armed with an understanding of these forces (provided by theories), you can

use available rules and resources more effectively to achieve your goals and those of the group.

The usefulness of any theory lies in its real-life application. Structuration theory deals with the power of each individual group member to change the behavior of a group by applying rules and resources during interactions. Every action in a group structures subsequent actions. Consider the following:

- Whenever you act, you are making choices—exercising your free will in a way that has consequences for, and that structures, subsequent group interactions.

- Our choices are somewhat constrained by external forces, existing group structures, and other members' behaviors. Try to be more aware of the choices—and constraints—before you.

- Members of distributed, virtual groups are much less likely to accept personal responsibility when the group is not going well; that is, we are much more likely to blame others for dysfunction in virtual groups than in face-to-face groups.[22] Recognizing this tendency can help you structure such groups so as to attain better outcomes.

- Work to identify the rules that are governing group members' behaviors. Are these rules contributing to the group's work, or are they perhaps impeding it? You can call attention to dysfunctional rules and help the group change them. You can sometimes change rules by violating them.

- Ask yourself which resources are available to you and to the rest of the group. Do you have particular knowledge or skills that are useful? Do others in the group have resources that you can help them tap into? Subtly bending group rules, sharing resources, and encouraging others to do the same are all ways to affect group processes and outcomes.

Rules and resources in interaction provide the structures that define your group's system. These systems change over time—sometimes suddenly—through the choices that individual group members make. This text and the course you're taking are designed to arm you with an ever-greater understanding of the rules and resources available to you in group interaction.

2.4.5: Functional Theory

OBJECTIVE: Identify functional group relationships that lead to better problem solving

Much of this course aims to help you identify and enact behaviors that will help your groups reach their intended goals. The term **function** refers to the effect or consequence

of a given behavior within a group system. For example, communication can help a group make decisions or manage conflict. Communication has an effect on the group; it has a function. Theories that concern themselves with group functions seek to identify and explain behaviors that help or allow a group to achieve its goals. Functional relationships exist within a group when an outcome occurs as a consequence of a specific behavior, which in turn was intended to produce the consequence.[23]

Three Propositions

The functional theory developed by Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa advances three propositions. These researchers suggest that effective group problem solving and decision making are most likely to occur under these propositions.[24]

Satisfy Task Requirements—Group members attempt to satisfy task requirements (including understanding the issue to be resolved, the characteristics of acceptable solutions, and the realistic alternatives; examining the alternatives; and selecting the alternative most likely to satisfy the requirements of the problem).

Overcome Constraints—Group members use communication to overcome constraints such as stress from deadlines, interpersonal conflicts, or self-serving interactions.

Review Decisions—Group members take the time to review the process through which they arrived at choices and, if necessary, reconsider their choice.

Functional theories provide the basis for how communication in groups promotes appropriate consequences—sound reasoning, critical thinking, the prevention of errors, and the building of productive relationships among group members.[25]

Review

Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of Small Group Communication

- Systems theory: The small group is an open system of interdependent elements, employing input variables and process variables to yield output.
- Social exchange theory: Groups remain attractive to their members so long as the rewards of group membership exceed the costs.
- Symbolic convergence theory: Group members develop a group consciousness and identity through the sharing of fantasies or stories, which are often chained together and share a common theme.
- Structuration theory: People use rules and resources to structure social interactions.
- Functional theory: Communication in groups promotes sound reasoning, prevents errors, and builds productive relationships among members.

2.5: A Model of Small Group Communication

OBJECTIVE: Apply theory to group communication

A model that takes into account all the possible sender, receiver, and message variables in a small group would be hopelessly complicated. Moreover, a complete systems model of group and team communication would necessarily include psychological forces as well as communication

variables.[26] No model is ever complete. Consequently, the model we offer is less than comprehensive but suggests the main features and relationships critical to understanding small group communication.

⌄ **By the end of this module, you will be able to:**

2.5.1 Describe the elements of a communication model

2.5.2 Explain how to use theories to their best advantage when thinking about groups

2.5.1: Parts of a Descriptive Model

OBJECTIVE: Describe the elements of a communication model

Figure 2-1 presents a descriptive model that includes important features of a group process and suggests relationships among those features. In this framework, small group communication comprises a constellation of variables, each related to every other. Communication establishes and maintains the relationships among these essential variables. This model thus reflects a systems approach to group and team communication.

Variables of the Descriptive Model

This model identifies the components of a group process that are central, critical considerations for effective group communication.

Communication—Human communication is how you make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. Communication is what people say, how they say it, and to whom they say it. This process is the primary focus of study in small group communication research.

Leadership—Behavior that exerts influence on the group is called **leadership**.

Goals—All groups have **goals**. For example, the group goal may be to provide therapy for members, to complete some designated task, or simply to have a good time. Individual group members also have goals. Often individual goals complement the group goal, but not always. Effective teamwork requires shared, clear, specific goals.[27]

Norms—A **norm** is a standard that establishes which behaviors are normally permitted or encouraged within the group and which are forbidden or discouraged. Every group—from your family to the president's cabinet—develops and maintains norms. Some norms are formal, such as a rule about when a group must use parliamentary procedure. Formal, explicitly stated norms are rules that prescribe how group members should behave. Other norms are informal, such as the fact that your study group always meets 15 minutes late. Norms guide and direct behavior in groups, and can also be viewed as characteristics of a group that differentiate it from all other groups.[28]
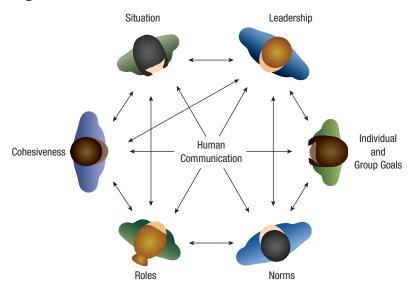
Figure 2-1 Constellation of Variables in Small Group Communication

Roles—The sets of expectations people hold for themselves and for others in a given context are **roles**. People play different roles in different groups. Researchers have identified several roles that need to be filled for a small group to reach its maximum levels of satisfaction and productivity.

Cohesiveness—Feelings of loyalty help unite the group. **Cohesiveness** is the degree of attraction that group members feel toward one another and toward the group.

Situation—The **situation**, or context in which group communication occurs, is of paramount importance. The task is significant, but many other important situational variables also influence the group's functioning, such as the group's size, the physical arrangement of group members, the location or setting, the group's purpose, and even the amount of stress placed on the group by time constraints or other internal or external pressures.

The combined effect of these variables results in group outcomes—that is, what the group or team accomplishes. Group and team outcomes may include solving problems, making decisions, feeling satisfied, reaching agreement, or even making money. Small group communication theories seek to explain the relationships among these and other variables and to make predictions about group outcomes. These theories help explain most of the complexity and uncertainty that surface at every level of group and team interaction. A good theoretical understanding of small groups, coupled with an expanded repertoire of communicative behavior, is the recipe for developing group communication competence—the objective of this course.

Virtual Collaboration

Modes of Communication

Face-to-face communication is "media rich" because it involves numerous modes of communication. A mode is the particular way or means through which communication is expressed. In face-to-face communication, the modes correspond to our senses. Thus, the message "I'm so glad to see you" is reinforced when accompanied with a smile and a hug. Modal contradiction occurs when modes conflict, as when a person smirks and continues staring into her cell phone while saying without enthusiasm, "I'm so glad to see you."

Generally speaking, modal reinforcement is desirable; adding modalities strengthens the message. But modal contradiction can also be used to subtly affect the intended message. It is, after all, the mother of sarcasm.

In virtual communication, the nonverbal cues that come so naturally through our senses are largely absent. Even so, the principles of modal reinforcement and contradiction still apply. Some researchers have argued that the goal of communication technology should be to maximize media richness for a particular task by using redundant or complementary modalities.[29] Today's technology offers visual and auditory possibilities for communication that were not present even a few years ago. The goal in virtual communication is to approximate face-to-face interaction as closely as possible.

How can you best match your text-based or audiovisual modality to the communication occurring in virtual teams? The best way to develop this skill is to be conversant with the communication modalities available to you, and then to consider your intended message from your target receivers' point of view. Which combinations of modalities will best strengthen your message without providing so much media richness as to be distracting?