In Mixed Company

Communicating in Small Groups and Teams

J. Dan Rothwell

Tenth Edition

In Mixed Company

Communicating in Small Groups and Teams

Tenth Edition

J. Dan Rothwell

To my family: Marcy, Hilary, Geoff, Barrett, and Clare

Brief Contents

Contents

10   Power in Groups   229

Preface

▶ I am profoundly grateful to all who have helped make *In Mixed Company* such a resounding success through nine editions. Despite its success, however, I have become increasingly concerned about the inflated pricing of *In Mixed Company*. So much so, that I have proactively changed publishers. **I am thrilled to report that Oxford University Press (OUP), a not-for-profit publisher of considerable renown, is publishing this tenth edition.** Publishing with OUP, coupled with the decision to significantly condense *In Mixed Company,* permits an astounding reduction in price. **This edition is about *$90 less expensive* than the previous print edition's list price, and about $125 less expensive as an e-book.**

With each new edition, I find it ever more challenging to make significant changes that make *In Mixed Company* an even better textbook for students. I have also become uncomfortably aware that, as the author, I have grown a bit too fond of my own words, hesitant to cut much detail from previous editions and to strive for greater concision. Consequently, **I have energetically edited this new edition.**

Even though I have made major edits to refurbish *In Mixed Company* and to reduce its price, **I have preserved the essence of previous versions.** The central unifying theme, that **cooperation** in small groups is usually superior to competition, has been maintained. The **communication competence model** continues to guide discussions of key small group concepts and processes. The model is one of the communication discipline's unique contributions to understanding and improving human behavior. It is thoroughly integrated throughout the text. **Systems theory** also remains as a key theoretical component of the text, providing a conceptual framework for analysis and insights. Finally**, the unique focus on power** in groups remains. As social psychologist Dacher Keltner (2016), author of *The Power Paradox*, notes, "Power defines the waking life of every human being . . . emerges instantaneously when humans interact" and "shapes our every interaction, from those between parent and children to those between work colleagues." **Power is a central underlying element in small group conflict, teamwork, decision making, problem solving, normative behavior, roles, and leadership.** I strongly believe that it deserves careful analysis, not simply obligatory mention, or cursory coverage. No other small group communication text provides the breadth and depth of coverage of this significant topic.

In addition, I continue to place great emphasis on **readability.** Textbooks are not meant to read like spy thrillers, but neither should they induce a coma by reading like instructions for filling out your income tax forms. Unlike calculus, which I have no idea how to make interesting, group communication, because of its relevance to your lives, should stir your interest. I have made a concerted effort to stimulate, not sedate you. The risk in telling you this, obviously, is that you may respond, "And that's the best you could do?" Alas, yes. Whatever the shortcomings of this work, I was ever mindful of my audience. I have searched in obvious and not-so-obvious places for the precise example, the poignant instance, and the dramatic case to enhance your reading enjoyment. I have employed a more **narrative or storytelling style** than is usual in textbook writing. I try to tell a story, not merely provide seemingly endless laundry lists of do's and don'ts. Chapter 6, for example, lists several perspectives on effective leadership, but I try to connect these perspectives to the story of how each evolved one from the other. This permits you to see the logical progression of theory and research on leadership. When I do provide lists of do's and don'ts, I try to make at least some of them more interesting to read than a cookbook recipe (e.g., the several steps for adapting to cultural diversity; the "thou shalt nots" of leader emergence; the six steps of the Standard Agenda; guidelines for effective meetings). The several case studies, vivid examples, and personal experiences are also narrative in nature, included to illustrate ideas and concepts and trigger reader interest. Research confirms that the narrative style not only adds interest but also increases comprehension and recall of information (Dahlstrom, 2014).

I also have attempted to enliven and personalize the writing style by incorporating colorful language and lively metaphors that bring interesting images to mind and to depart from standard academic practice by employing the "perpendicular pronoun" *I*. Occasional use of first-person singular speaks more directly and personably to readers than the more impersonal style of writing commonly used in textbooks (such as "in this author's view"). Although it has been suggested that I employ the "editorial we" instead of the first-person singular, I tend to agree with Mark Twain, who said that "people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial 'we,'" but others should avoid it. I could use passive voice instead, but that makes copyeditors twitch and automatic grammar checkers become annoying nags.

Finally, I am a great believer in the potential of **humor** to gain and maintain the attention of my readers. Humor can often cross generational divides and spark interest in scholarly subjects that can seem distant and abstract until a humorous example, quip, or story enlivens the reading and

ignites interest, even promotes understanding. There is humor to be found throughout *In Mixed Company.* I have attempted to infuse some amusement for your entertainment and interest whenever possible.

Significant Substantive Changes

There is often the suspicion, not always without merit, that a new edition of a textbook offers mostly cosmetic changes (a few new photos or an occasional new example or reference). This is emphatically not the case for *In Mixed Company.* **This 10th edition has been rebuilt from the ground up. The Table of Contents looks largely unchanged, but don't be fooled by appearances.** The most significant changes include:

1. Careful editing has significantly condensed every chapter. This tenth edition is **almost 100 pages shorter** than the previous edition. This isn't merely a spring cleaning in which old, out-of-style stuff has been discarded, although, while keeping classic research references, **more than 600 older references have been expunged.** A partially new wardrobe of ideas and research has been added. **Advice offered in several instances will not exactly duplicate previous editions.** This can affect student performance on exams if they use an older edition, so they should be cautioned about this. Extreme care, however, has been taken to maintain the essence of each chapter while reducing its size.
2. **Organizational changes** have been made to enhance concision and comprehension. Chapters most notable for these changes are Chapters 4 (group climate), 6 (leadership), 7 (teams), 10 (power), and 12 (virtual groups).
3. Research and theory have been thoroughly updated in every chapter. **Almost half of the references are dated from 2013 to 2018.** Hundreds of new references incorporate the most current research and theory on small group communication. In all subject areas, I have searched energetically for the very latest research and insights. In many cases, the newer research has strengthened support for claims made in previous editions. In other instances, it has required important modifications.
4. New, sharper examples have replaced shopworn illustrations. **New business-oriented and workplace examples, surveys, and studies appear throughout the text.** I have also included numerous recent events to illustrate key points and to give the text a contemporary feel.
5. **Discussion of technology and its influence on small group communication also has been expanded considerably.** In addition to updated

coverage of technology in Chapter 12, I have included substantial new material on virtual groups and social media throughout the text. **I am reasonably confident that no more thorough treatment of virtual groups is available in a foundational small group communication text.**

6. Extensive treatment of **culture** is blended throughout this tenth edition. The breadth and depth of this coverage can be easily ascertained by simply glancing at the index under "culture." Blending the discussion of culture throughout *In Mixed Company* underlines the inseparable nature of this subject from an abundance of topics.

7. Expanded coverage of **diversity.** The gender and ethnic bias and leadership emergence section has been completely revised and placed in the context of power imbalance (Chapter 10). Diversity issues are incorporated throughout the text.

8. **Listening** has received additional treatment. Check the index for a delineation of extensive discussion of this important subject.

9. **Considerable new material** has been added. For example:
    a. Uncertainty reduction theory
    b. The Platinum Rule and cultural adaptation
    c. Social identity theory
    d. Positivity versus negativity and group climate
    e. The "criticism sandwich"
    f. Incivility and communication climate
    g. Role status equalization effect and social media
    h. Role flexibility
    i. Romance of leadership
    j. Implicit theories of leadership
    k. Distributive leadership
    l. Diminished creativity and information overload
    m. "Hepeating" and gender bias
    n. Microaggressions and gender bias
    o. Sluggish effort as a passive aggression strategy
    p. Trust and task versus relationship conflict
    q. Team identification and virtual groups
    r. "Truth decay" and critical thinking

10. **Closer Look segments have been condensed and blended into the main text,** not separated into boxed material. This saves space, and I suspect, as many reviewers noted, that students often leap over boxed material mistakenly believing that the coverage is tertiary not of primary significance (i.e., not included on the exams).

Continued and Expanded Pedagogical Features

Several acclaimed features of previous editions have been maintained and expanded.

1. Tables, each called **Second Look,** act as succinct summaries of complicated or detailed material. These can be useful when studying for exams. Each Second Look has been reviewed, and in some cases, revised.

2. **Self-Assessment Instruments** in previous editions were well received. Some of these instruments have been slightly revised. A few, because of size (e.g., assertiveness), have been moved to the OUP ancillary resource center at oup-arc.com. Self-assessments remain an important part of engaging student learning.

3. The very popular **Video Case Studies** segment appearing at the end of every chapter has been expanded and includes many recent examples. Some reviewers have requested a DVD with all of the video case studies provided as a free ancillary. As advantageous as this would obviously be to any instructor using the video case studies suggested, the cost of gaining permission to use copyright-protected videos for such a DVD would require a major donation from Bill Gates or would send the price of the text into the stratosphere. Given my commitment to drastically lowering the price of *In Mixed Company*, such an option is unfortunately not feasible.

4. A **glossary** of key terms for quick reference appears at the end of the text. Terms that are boldfaced in each chapter are included in the glossary. Many new terms have been added for this edition. A digital glossary is available. See the instructions below to access additional course materials online.

5. **Practice exams**, called **"Quizzes Without Consequences,"** appear on the *In Mixed Company* OUP ancillary resource center at oup-arc.com. These quizzes help prepare students for graded exams. Students frequently mention to me how helpful these practice quizzes have been to them.

6. **PowerPoint slides** have been prepared for classroom presentation of material. Most instructors prepare their own slides, but a potpourri of slides is available for those who may want to supplement their file.

7. The comprehensive **Instructor's Resource Manual** has been revised. The **Test Bank** of exam questions for each chapter has been expanded with more than one version of each question (single answer or multiple answers) available. Both the extensive activities and the test bank included in the manual have been extremely well received.

All *In Mixed Company*'s companion resources are available to qualified adopters, and ordering options for student supplements are flexible. Instructors, please consult your local Oxford University Press sales representative for more information, to evaluate examination copies of any of the student or instructor resources, or to request product demonstrations.

Text Organization

Although there is no ideal organizational pattern, my schema for the sequence of chapters is quite simple. A theoretical foundation is discussed first (Chapters 1 and 2), followed by how groups are formed and developed (Chapter 3). Then a discussion of how to establish the proper climate for the group to work effectively is presented (Chapter 4). An explanation and analysis of what roles group members are likely to play comes next (Chapter 5 and 6). Then, how to build teams and instill effective teamwork in groups is addressed (Chapter 7). A discussion of decision making/problem solving—the primary work to be performed by most groups—with special focus on critical thinking is next (Chapters 8 and 9). The close connection between power and conflict is then explored (Chapters 10 and 11). Finally, virtual groups and social media are addressed (Chapter 12). I can see other ways of organizing this same material, but the order I have chosen works well for me, students seem satisfied with the sequence of topics, and reviewers have praised the organization.

Acknowledgments

home office working on three textbooks. You have many extraordinary gifts and talents, including serving as my custom cartoonist, but I love you just for being the amazing person that you are.

About the Author

J. Dan Rothwell is the former chair of the Communication Studies Department at Cabrillo College. He has a B.A. in American History from the University of Portland (Oregon), an M.A. in Rhetoric and Public Address, and a Ph.D. in Communication Theory and Social Influence. His M.A. and Ph.D. are both from the University of Oregon. He is the author of four other books: *In the Company of Others: An Introduction to Communication, Telling It Like It Isn't: Language Misuse and Malpractice*, *Interpersonal Communication: Influences and Alternatives* (with James Costigan), and *Practically Speaking*. He is also working on a sixth textbook, with his colleague and friend Michelle Waters, on business communication.

During his extensive teaching career, Dr. Rothwell has received more than two dozen teaching awards, including the *Ernest L. Boyer International Award for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Technology* conferred by the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning, Florida State College, and the National Council of Instructional Administrators; the *Cabrillo College "Innovative Teacher of the Year"* award; the National Communication Association *"Community College Educator of the Year"* award; an official resolution by the California State Senate acknowledging Dr. Rothwell's excellence in teaching; and the *"Master Teacher"* award from the Western States Communication Association.

Finally, Dr. Rothwell's public speaking book, *Practically Speaking*, received the national 2018 Textbook Excellence Award from the Textbook and Academic Authors Association. Having never achieved one of his early goals in life—to be a Hall of Fame major league baseball pitcher—this, and his teaching awards, will have to partially compensate for his lifelong disappointment.

Professor Rothwell encourages feedback and correspondence from both students and instructors regarding *In Mixed Company*. Anyone so inclined may communicate with him by email at jdanrothwell@gmail.com.

Communication Competence in Groups

If you want to find out what people think about groups, ask them. I have on numerous occasions. Many students seem to view working in groups with the same fondness they have for wisdom tooth removal. Comments include: "If God had ordered a committee to create the world, it would still be discussing proposals." "Working in groups is like eating tofu. I'm told it's good for me, but it makes me gag." "I've had the flu and I've had to work in groups. I prefer the flu." "I hate groups. I hate group assignments. I hate teachers who require group assignments. Take the hint." A survey by the University of Phoenix found that 95% of more than a thousand respondents agree that working in teams serves an important function in the workplace, but only 24% preferred to do so ("University of Phoenix Survey," 2013). Additional student surveys reveal similar negative views (Karau & Elsaid, 2009; Myers & Goodboy, 2005). Some argue that even professors are not particularly fond of group work (Crowder, 2016). Sorensen (1981) coined the term **grouphate** to describe how troublesome the group experience is for many people.

There are several reasons for the prevalence of grouphate. First, individuals often believe they have contributed far more to group endeavors than other group members. A whopping 97% of students surveyed by Gurrie (2013) responded that they have experienced being "stuck with all of the work" when doing group tasks. Fierce resentment results. Second, group work can be time-consuming and often unproductive, stoking intense frustration. The University of Phoenix survey found that 68% of respondents had been members of dysfunctional groups. Also, middle managers spend about a third of their time, and upper managers spend half their time in meetings. These executives consider more than two-thirds of these meetings to be a brain-deadening waste of time (Larsen, 2017). Third, members' incompatibility can be a huge negative. Personality clashes, irritating communication behaviors, and having to deal with difficult group members all encourage reticence to work in groups.

Despite these negative views of groups, almost everyone can point to positive group experiences, including some that are profoundly rewarding.

objectives

The primary purpose of this chapter is to establish the theoretical groundwork for a communication competence approach to small groups and teams. There are four chapter objectives:

1. To correct common misconceptions regarding the human communication process.

2. To explain what communication is and isn't.

3. To identify broadly what constitutes competent communication.

4. To discuss general ways to achieve communication competence.

The rewards include a feeling of belonging and affection gained from **primary groups** (family and friends), social connection from **social media networks** (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter), and social support in difficult times from **support groups** (Alcoholics Anonymous, cancer survivors groups). Also, you gain satisfaction from solving challenging problems by working in **project groups** (task forces, self-managing work teams), you enhance your knowledge from participating in **learning groups** (class study groups, Bible study groups, mock trial teams), you experience thrills and entertainment from participating in **activities groups** (chess club, sports teams), and you gain a sense of community from joining **neighborhood groups** (homeowners associations). Finally, you can acquire an identity and achieve pleasure from helping others through **social** and **service groups** (fraternities, sororities, Rotary, Lions, Habitat for Humanity), and you may find a creative outlet in **music** and **artistic groups** (bands, choirs, quilting circles).

Blend Images/Shutterstock.com

Hero Images/Getty Images

Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock.com

Blulz60/Shutterstock.com

We participate in a wide variety of small groups that serve many purposes, such as virtual business meetings, volunteer construction teams, therapy groups, and competitive sports teams.

The most successful groups are composed of members who enjoy working in groups and who experience the rewards. The least successful groups are composed of members who dislike working in groups and primarily experience the disadvantages (Karau & Elsaid, 2009). Communication plays a central role in achieving group success and producing rewarding experiences. Thus, **competent communication is a principal means of counteracting grouphate** (Sorensen, 1981).

Whatever the degree of your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with groups, there is no escaping them, unless you plan to live your life alone in a cave as an out-of-touch survivalist. Reliance on groups will increase, not diminish, in the future. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Communication Association, among other organizations, all recommend frequent group activity in the college classroom. Four-fifths of both Fortune 1000 companies and manufacturing organizations use self-managing work teams (MacDonald, 2017). One report on global organizations ranked "the rise of teams" as the top trend (McDowell et al., 2016). A survey of 1,372 respondents from 80 countries concluded that **virtual groups**—**groups whose members rarely, if ever, meet face to face, and are connected by electronic technology—are an integral part of conducting business globally** (Solomon, 2016). Maximizing the benefits of our unavoidable group experiences is a worthy goal.

The central purpose of this textbook, then, is to teach you how to be a competent communicator in small groups and teams. Because we all have participated in many groups, it may be tempting to conclude that these experiences already prepared you for group success. Experience, however, sometimes teaches us bad habits and misinformation (note the myths discussed in the next section). I will not presume to tell you what you do and don't know about small group communication. That is for you to assess, perhaps with the help of your instructor.

When making this initial self-assessment, however, please consider this: **Most Americans have a common tendency to overestimate their communication proficiency in groups.** A long-term study of 600 teams and 6,000 team members in a wide variety of organizations found that assessments of leaders by team members were a whopping *50% lower* than the leaders' self-assessments (LaFasto & Larson, 2001). A more recent study parallels these findings. An exceedingly generous 96% of self-identified leaders of corporate virtual teams rated themselves as "effective" or "very effective." Only 19% of team members, however, agreed that most team leaders were adequately prepared to lead virtual teams effectively, and 58% rated their own team leaders as underprepared (Solomon, 2016). **Ironically, it is the poorest communicators who inflate their self-assessments the most** (Dunning, 2003). The next section helps explain why this is the case.

Myths about Communication

Before tackling the question "What is communication?" and then "What is competent communication?" let's sweep out some of the musty misconceptions many people have stored in their intellectual attics regarding the communication process. As American humorist Will Rogers reputedly remarked, "It isn't what we don't know that gives us trouble; it's what we know that ain't so." Foolishness springs from holding firmly to indefensible **myths**—beliefs contradicted by fact. Consider four of them.

Myth 1: Communication Is a Cure-All

Improving communication is not the magical answer to all your group woes. Research reveals that some problems between individuals are not solvable (Fulwiler, 2018). A group member may never develop a sunny disposition and a less cynical view of the world. Your group leader may never be more than an imperious, narcissistic, inconsiderate tyrant. Competent communication can help us cope with our recurring disagreements and challenges, but it may not change some people for the better.

In addition, a dysfunctional organizational system characterized by unclear roles and responsibilities and poorly designed decision-making processes may be the root cause of poor communication. Training to improve communication in such circumstances is likely to prove futile without systemic changes (Baker, 2015). Sometimes groups dismantle, not because the communication is poor but because members simply don't like each other or because they have contradictory visions for the group.

Communication is a tool that, in the possession of someone knowledgeable and skillful, can be used to help solve most problems that arise in groups. **Communication, however, is not an end in itself, but merely a means to an end.** You will not solve every conceivable problem in groups by learning to communicate more effectively, because not all group problems are communication based.

Myth 2: Communication Can Break Down

Communication does not break down. Machines break down; they quit, and if they belong to me, they do so with amazing regularity. Human beings continue to communicate even when they may wish not to do so. For example, not showing up for a group meeting, remaining silent during group discussions, or walking out in the middle of a group discussion without

saying a word does not bring communication to a halt. Group members infer messages from these nonverbal acts—perhaps incorrect messages, but potentially important ones nonetheless.

The view that communication can break down comes partly from the recognition that we do not always achieve our goals through communication; the group may disband in failure. But failure to achieve group goals may occur even when communication between the parties in conflict is exemplary. So, where's the breakdown?

Myth 3: Effective Communication Is Merely Skill Building

The skills orientation to communication assumes that if you learn a few key communication skills, you will become a much better communicator. **Without understanding the complexities of the communication process, no amount of skills training will be meaningful, and it may be harmful.** Merely teaching the skill of assertiveness to a battered woman, for example, without addressing the volatile and often unpredictable circumstances of abusive relationships in families, could prove fatal for the abused woman and her children (Dombeck, 2010). Assertiveness with your boss or team leader may get you fired or demoted to a position equivalent to cleaning up after parading elephants. One skill doesn't fit all circumstances.

Teaching communication skills without knowledge, without a well-researched theoretical map guiding our behavior, is like constructing a house without a carefully developed set of blueprints. The blueprint offered later in this chapter to help you succeed in groups is the communication competence model.

Myth 4: Effective Communication Is Just Common Sense

Consider **hindsight bias**—the "I-knew-it-already" tendency (Roese & Vohs, 2012). We are inclined to overestimate our prior knowledge once we have been told the correct answers. Anything can seem like mere common sense when you've been given the correct answers, or as psychologist David Myers (2002) observes, "How easy it is to seem wise when drawing the bull's-eye after the arrow has struck" (p. 89). Everybody knows that opposites attract, right? When told this by Myers, most students find this conclusion unsurprising. But wait! When college students are told the *opposite* ("Birds of a feather flock together"), most also find this result unsurprising and merely common sense.

The hindsight bias may influence us to view competent communication as mere common sense once we have received communication training. If, however, it is just common sense, why does miscommunication occur so often? For example, a survey of professionals "from all career levels and industries" concluded that "communication deficiencies" are the top challenge for business teams, and only 3% rated their organizations' communication as "very effective" (Miller, 2017a). Fewer than a quarter of these same organizations are "able to help teams meet goals and business objectives through effective communication" (Miller, 2017b). A principal reason most teams struggle is lack of communication training in how to make teams work (Ellis et al., 2005). Although a huge majority of recent college graduates believe they have the necessary communication skills to be successful in their careers, employers mostly disagree. Principal deficiencies are in verbal communication and working in teams (Gould, 2016).

The simple way to test whether competent communication in groups is merely common sense and you knew it all along is to pose questions before training is received. For years, I quizzed my students at the beginning of a term on general knowledge of small group communication (**see online example at oup-arc.com**). I did not ask technical questions or definitions of concepts (making this the least challenging test of the term). Consistently, students did very poorly on this quiz (most flunked). Such results are not surprising or cause for ridicule. It is foolish to expect students to do well on this exam before they've taken the class.

Learning requires a degree of humility, a willingness to recognize and address our shortcomings. To paraphrase Alfred Korzybski, no one knows everything about anything. Everyone has more to learn. You are invited to approach this text, not with an attitude of contentment with your knowledge and skills (whatever their level), but with a strong desire to learn more and to improve your communication in groups.

Communication Defined

Thus far, I have indicated what communication is not, but not what it is. The definition of communication involves several fundamental attributes.

> ## focus questions
> 1. How do the content and the relationship dimensions of messages differ?
> 2. "Communication is a process." What does this mean?

Communication as Transactional: Mutually Influential

Human communication is **transactional.** This means that all parties engaged in communicating mutually influence one another. Each person is both a sender and a receiver simultaneously, not merely a sender or a receiver. Thus, as you speak, you receive *feedback* (responses), mostly nonverbal, from listeners. This, in turn, influences the messages that you continue to send. Skillful communicators read feedback accurately and adjust their ensuing message appropriately.

You can see this mutual-influence process clearly by examining the two dimensions of a message—content and relationship (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The **content dimension** refers to the information transmitted. The **relationship dimension** refers to how messages define or redefine the relationship among group members.

Consider the following transactional dialogue:

Anne: We should meet to prepare our group presentation.

Benny: I can't meet until Wednesday night after 6:30. I work.

Charise: Wednesday, say about 7:00, works fine for me. How about the rest of you?

David: No can do! I'm busy.

Eduardo: Well, get unbusy because our project is due in a week, and we're way behind.

David: Hey, Satan's spawn, come up with another time.

Benny: Come on, everybody. No need to get ugly.

Anne: Exactly how busy are you on Wednesday night, David? Can't you change plans?

David: I'm busy. Let's leave it at that.

Eduardo: Why don't you come up with a time that works with your "busy" schedule.

Charise: How about next Monday evening?

Anne: Now I've got a schedule conflict.

The content of this group transaction is the need to schedule a group meeting and the schedule conflicts that exist. The relationship dimension, however, is far more complex. Group members are not merely identifying scheduling difficulties; they're maneuvering for power positions in the group. Who gets to tell whom what to do is a subtext. How messages are spoken (as a demand or a request) influences group members' responses. Whether group members are being cooperative or competitive with each other affects the discussion.

When you are in a group, every utterance, choice, and action continually defines and redefines who you are in relation to other group members and who they are in relation to you. This is ongoing and unavoidable. Individuals affect the group, and the group influences the individual. Communication in groups is a continuous series of transactions.

Communication as a Process: The Continuous Flow

Identifying communication as a process recognizes that nothing stands still, or as the bumper sticker proclaims, "Change is inevitable—except from a vending machine." Communication reveals the dynamic nature of relationships and events.

Communication is a process because changes in events and relationships are part of a continuous flow. You can't understand the ocean by freezing a single wave on film. The ocean is understood only in its dynamism—its tides, currents, waves in motion, plant and animal life interacting symbiotically, and so forth. Similarly, communication makes sense not by isolating a word, sentence, gesture, facial expression, or exclamation, but by looking at currents of thought and feelings expressed verbally and nonverbally as a whole.

As a student, for instance, you affect the quality of instruction by your attitude and degree of interest in the subject matter. Show indifference by texting or surfing websites on your laptop, and you suck the life out of a teacher's enthusiasm and invite a negative reaction. Relationships between teachers and students may change in the short span of a single class period or in the flash of an ill-chosen phrase, especially when controversial material is presented.

We cannot freeze relationships in time. Every conversation is a point of departure for an ensuing conversation. Every communication experience is the result of the accumulation of experiences preceding the present one. Each new experience affects future transactions. Human communication is a process.

Communication as Sharing Meaning: Making Sense

The term *communication* is derived from the Latin word *communicare*, which denotes "to share." Sharing from this perspective does not mean merely exchanging information like one would exchange gifts. Communication is not just transferring "stuff" from one person to another. This isn't the postal service delivering packages. You attempt, and often achieve, something deeper when you communicate with other humans. You attempt to share meaning, which is "the conscious pattern humans create out of

their interpretation of experience" (Anderson & Ross, 2002). You construct meaning by making connections and patterns in your mind that "make sense" of your world. You then attempt to share this constructed meaning with others, who in turn reconstruct your message to try to understand your meaning. You share this meaning both verbally and nonverbally.

Verbal Communication: Telling It Like It Isn't We share meaning verbally with language. **Language** is a structured system of **symbols** for sharing meaning. Symbols are representations of *referents*—whatever the symbol refers to. Because symbols represent referents but are not the objects, ideas, events, or relationships represented, symbols have no meaning apart from us. Meaning is in the mind of the beholder. Words are symbols, so meaning is not contained in words. We aren't "telling it like it is" (identifying objective reality); we're telling others what our subjective perception of the world is.

The meaning and usage of words depend on common agreement. As a speech community, English speakers tacitly agree to certain meanings and appropriate usages for words, even if this sometimes seems odd (Lederer, 1998). For example, our feet can smell, but our noses can run. Comedian Steven Wright asks, "Why is it that when you transport something by car it's called a shipment but when you transport something by ship it's called cargo?"

This common agreement, however, doesn't always avoid misunderstandings because words can be ambiguous; they can have double or multiple common meanings. A *booty call* could be an invitation to a treasure hunt or a search for something quite different. Consider actual newspaper headlines reported by the *Columbia Journalism Review*: "Prostitutes Appeal to Pope" and "Kids Make Nutritious Snacks." Imagine a non-native speaker of English trying to decode this sentence: "The woman was present to present the present to her friend, presently." A study of "problematic communication" among crew members and in pilot–air traffic controller interactions concludes that "it is almost certain that communication has played a central role in a significant proportion of aviation accidents" (Howard, 2008, p. 371). "Multiple meanings of words and phrases" was listed as one of the principal problems.

Panoramic Images/Getty Images

Language can be ambiguous. Should we be afraid of children?

Culture further complicates verbal misunderstandings. Electrolux, a Scandinavian vacuum cleaner manufacturer, once used the sales slogan in the United States, "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." In preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, a retired army colonel named David Tool, who resided in the capital city, was hired to correct notoriously poor translations featured on English signs. "Beijing Anus Hospital" was changed to "Beijing Proctology Hospital," and "Deformed Man Toilet" thankfully was changed to "Disabled Person Toilet" (Boudreau, 2007).

The increasing globalization of business makes even the choice of language to communicate within and among multicultural groups and organizations an important consideration. "Those who share a mother tongue have a linguistic bond that differs from those who speak the same language as a second language" (Victor, 2007, p. 3). If English is chosen as the preferred language of business, this can create an in-group/out-group dynamic between those who speak it easily and those who do not. The choice of language to conduct business can directly affect teamwork and long-term business relationships for good or ill (Chen et al., 2006; Swift & Huang, 2004). When a group speaks a language not well understood by all its members, as can occur in our increasingly multicultural workplaces, those left out of the conversation because of difficulties fully understanding the language spoken may feel socially ostracized and angry (Hitlan et al., 2015). This *linguistic divide* can reduce group productivity (Dotan-Eliaz et al., 2009).

The emergence of global virtual teams has also created an international linguistic challenge. English is the dominant language of the Internet ("Internet World Users by Language," 2018). Inevitably, the nuances and complexities of mastering a language such as English lead to problems of interpretation and translation. One study showed that 75% of respondents found language difficulties challenging (Solomon, 2016).

Seemingly straightforward messages can also produce difficulties sharing exact meaning. Consider, for example, whether the email from your team leader saying that the team project "is fine" should be interpreted as damning (with faint praise) or as giving a genuine thumbs-up for a job well done. In addition, "maybe" to an American means possibly yes, but to a Japanese, "maybe" means a polite no (Kameda, 2014).

Finally, **we indicate linguistically our identification with a group.** A study of language used by group members on Reddit, for example, found that their language styles and word choices converged. Redditors revealed their group identification by adopting the linguistic norms of their social media group (McEwan, 2016). In other words, Redditors share a common language to indicate group affiliation.

kurhan/Shutterstock.com

Nonverbal communication is wordless meaning. What meaning is there in a smile? Is there more than one meaning? Are these smiles natural or fake? How can you tell?

Nonverbal Communication: Wordless Meaning We share meaning nonverbally as well as verbally. **Nonverbal communication** is sharing meaning with others without using words. Our facial expressions, eye contact, personal appearance, tone of voice, gestures, posture, touch, and use of space and time all have the potential to communicate messages to group members.

One of the difficulties with communicating in virtual groups is the absence of nonverbal cues, in whole or in part, that accompany verbal, face-to-face messages (Yang et al., 2018). One study of virtual teams revealed that "lack of face-to-face contact" was identified by 89% of respondents as a significant problem (Solomon, 2016). The emotional tone of an online written message can easily be misinterpreted as hostile, impersonal, or disagreeable because vocal tone, facial expressions, posture, gestures, and the normal array of nonverbal cues are missing (Myers, 2017). Emojis help but are still limited. Individuals may also be hesitant to use them in business communication for fear of appearing too informal and unprofessional.

Nonverbal communication, like verbal communication, is often ambiguous. When group members look down for several minutes while you are speaking, does it mean they are bored, uncomfortable with your message, not listening, carefully considering your message, or devising a plan to exit the meeting early? When a group member frowns, is he or she showing confusion, taking offense at something said, disagreeing, or suddenly remembering the dog was left alone in the house with no exit for using the outdoors as a toilet? Jury consultant Howard Varinsky notes that attempting to decipher a jury's verdict by observing whether jurors look at or avoid eye contact with the defendant before the pronouncement of guilt or innocence is silly. "Who they look at when they come into the courtroom—you can interpret looks 50 different ways." Rich Matthews, a jury consultant with Decision Analysis in San Francisco, states that it is "practically

impossible and it's just dangerous to interpret facial expressions and gestures and reactions" during a trial (quoted in Sulek, 2004, p. 9A; see also Hoffer et al., 2013).

Sharing meaning nonverbally between cultures can be equally problematic (Cotton, 2013; Manolaki, 2016). The "A-OK" gesture in the United States that forms a circle with the index finger and the thumb is obscene in Brazil, and it means "worthless" in France and "money" in Japan. Raising the index finger to signify "one" means "two" in Italy; the thumb is one. In Japan, however, the upright thumb means "five" (counting begins with the index finger, and the thumb is the last digit). In the United States, nodding the head up and down means "yes" and shaking it side to side means "no." In Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, and Bengal, however, it is the reverse. In Greece, tipping the head back abruptly means "no," but the same gesture in India means "yes." (Nod your head if you understand all of this.)

Even though nonverbal communication can be ambiguous and difficult to read accurately, it can nevertheless have a big impact on our impressions of others (Knapp et al., 2014). In 2004, Scott Peterson was found guilty of murdering his pregnant wife and unborn child. Jurors revealed after the trial that they chose the death penalty as his punishment partly due to Peterson's nonverbal communication. Juror Richelle Nice said, "For me, a big part of it was at the end—the verdict—no emotion. No anything. That spoke a thousand words—loud and clear. Today—the giggle at the table. Loud and clear." Jury foreman Steve Cardosi echoed this reaction: "He lost his wife and his child, and it didn't seem to faze him" (quoted in Sulek, 2004, p. 16A). Similarly, one study of jurors' reactions to nonverbal communication by judges during mock trials showed a negative reaction to a judge's perceived lack of involvement (e.g., pen tapping, paper shuffling) and apparent bias (e.g., scornful facial expressions) during trial proceedings (Burnett & Badzinski, 2005).

Mixed messages also show the impact of nonverbal cues. A **mixed message** occurs when there is positive verbal and negative nonverbal communication, or vice versa. A group member may verbally endorse the group's decision but nonverbally exhibit disagreement, even contempt. It is easier to hide our real feelings verbally than it is nonverbally. Attempting to wipe an opinion off your face is challenging.

I have thus far discussed what communication is not and, conversely, what communication is. To summarize by way of definition, **communication** is a transactional process of sharing meaning with others. The intricacies of sharing meaning with others in group situations will become more apparent when I discuss what constitutes competent communication, the next topic for consideration.

Communication Competence

Defining communication does not tell you how to communicate competently. To accomplish this goal, let's begin with a definition. **Communication competence** is engaging in communication behavior with others that is both effective and appropriate in a given context (Spitzberg, 2015). This definition requires brief elaboration.

> ## focus questions
> **1.** How do you determine communication competence?
> **2.** Does appropriate communication require strict conformity to group rules?

Effectiveness: Achieving Goals

Communication competence is partially predicated on results. Consequently, **effectiveness** is defined as how well we have progressed toward the achievement of goals. Someone who knows the changes in communication behavior that need to be made, and who wants to make these changes but never does, can hardly be deemed a competent communicator.

A Matter of Degree: From Deficiency to Proficiency Communication effectiveness is a relative concept—a matter of degree. We speak of communicators along a continuum, from highly proficient in achieving goals to woefully deficient, with designations in between such as ordinary and average. All of us have our communication strengths and weaknesses in certain situations and circumstances. Some individuals are at ease in social situations such as parties or gatherings of strangers, but they would rather be dipped in molasses and strapped to an anthill than confront conflict in their own group. We can be highly proficient in one circumstance but minimally skillful or depressingly ineffective in another situation. Therefore, the label "competent communicator" is a judgment of an individual's degree of proficiency in achieving goals in a specific context, not an inherent characteristic of any individual.

We (Not Me) Oriented: Primacy of Groups A We-orientation means that your primary attention is on the group (we), not the individual (me). Zander (1982) even claims, "A body of people is not a group if the members are primarily interested in individual accomplishment" (p. 2). This, however, doesn't mean that group interests should always supersede individual

interests. Nevertheless, trying to achieve your individual goals at the expense of the group's goals usually produces unsatisfactory outcomes for both you and the group (Platow et al., 2015). Research by the Gallup organization found that 60% of government workers are miserable because of "horrible bosses" who exhibit less interest in the welfare of employees than in nailing a good tee time on the golf links (Bradberry, 2017).

There are potential dividends when group members assume a We-orientation. Teams win championships, businesses innovate, and students earn better grades. A We-orientation requires concern for others, not merely concern for self. Consequently, communication competence in groups necessitates behavior that is both effective and appropriate.

Appropriateness: Following the Rules

The appropriateness of a person's communication is determined by examining the context. Thus, **appropriateness** means complying with contextual rules and their accompanying expectations. Every communication transaction has a context, or an environment in which meaning emerges. Context consists of *who* (sender) communicates *what* (message) to *whom* (receiver), *why* (purpose) the communicator does it, and *where* (setting), *when* (time), and *how* (way) it is done. Thus, appropriateness means complying with rules and their accompanying expectations derived from contexts. A **rule** is a prescription that indicates what you should or shouldn't do in specific contexts. **Rules govern every communication transaction** (Shimanoff, 2009).

Rule Violations: Consequential Effects Communication becomes inappropriate if it violates rules when such violations could be averted without sacrificing a goal by choosing alternative communication behaviors (Getter & Nowinski, 1981). Groups expect rules to be followed, but when rules are violated the consequences can be significant.

Consider some examples. First, a study of student-to-teacher email and text messaging showed that students often send overly casual messages to teachers. Messages such as "R U Able to Meat Me" incline an instructor "to like the student less, view them as less credible, have a lesser opinion of the message quality, and make them less willing to comply with students' simple email requests" (Stephens et al., 2009, p. 318). Text abbreviations ("R U" instead of "are you") are particularly disliked by teachers, and misspellings and apparent lack of proofreading ("meat" instead of "meet") clearly diminish the sender's credibility. Standard implicit rules for teacher–student communication dictate that students communicate

thoughtfully and respectfully with teachers. If your study group or project team needs to email or text message your instructor, show care and respect by avoiding overly casual, inappropriate messaging. This study also underlines the importance of proofreading all emails and text messages before sending them, especially to all members of teams in work and professional settings. Beware the risks of autocorrect! It is notorious for changes to text messages that make you seem moronic or weird if you do not catch the ludicrous "corrections." True story: a friend of mine texted a colleague at work about a delicious "nut taco" recipe. Autocorrect had changed it to "butt taco"—not so delicious.

Second, a survey of more than 2,600 hiring and human resource managers conducted by Harris Interactive for Career Builder, a web-based employment organization, listed answering a cellphone or text message during the interview, appearing arrogant or entitled, dressing inappropriately, and failing to make eye contact as the most common mistakes made by job applicants (Grasz, 2017). An interviewing panel expects appropriate behavior from applicants. Interrupting an interview to answer a cellphone or to send a text message communicates less interest in the job and more interest in immediate communication with others. Dressing too casually for a formal interview sends the message, "I don't take this interview seriously." Displays of arrogance and entitlement can instantly kill an interview. Know the rules and meet expectations accordingly, or you'll be collecting unemployment compensation.

Rule Changes: No Sacrosanct Rules Some rules may need to be modified. A kerfuffle in Congress became a national news story in 2017 when female reporters were barred from the House Speaker's Lobby for wearing sleeveless dresses. Congresswoman Jackie Speier organized a small ad hoc group protest on the Capitol steps "because women have the right to bare arms." House Speaker Paul Ryan noted the uproar and remarked, "Decorum is important, especially for this institution, and a dress code in the chamber and the lobby makes sense. But we also don't need to bar otherwise accepted contemporary business attire. So, look for change on that soon" (quoted by Abramson, 2017).

The appropriateness of your communication cannot be determined by merely examining a message that is isolated from the rich complexity of context. For instance, you may self-disclose intimate information to members of some groups but not others. If you attend a therapy group on marriage, self-disclosing will be expected and encouraged because it is compatible with the group's purpose. If, however, you are talking to a meeting of the Student Senate or the Dormitory Advisory Committee, intimate

self-disclosure will likely make members squirm in their chairs and wish for an earthquake as a distraction. The purpose of these groups is not therapeutic, so the rules that dictate appropriate communication in these contexts are different from rules found at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or Marriage Encounter.

Intercultural Challenges: Individualism–Collectivism

Multicultural small groups are becoming the norm, not the exception. Consequently, membership diversity poses challenges when applying the communication competence model. All cultures vary in the degree of emphasis they place on individuals exploring their uniqueness and independence versus maintaining their conformity and interdependence. This **individualism–collectivism dimension** is thought by some scholars to be the most important, deep-seated value that distinguishes one culture from another (Santos et al., 2017). **The individualism–collectivism dimension is at the center of the communication competence model's We-orientation perspective and the importance of rules that determine appropriate communication in varying cultural contexts.**

Individualist cultures have an "I" consciousness. **The autonomy of the individual is of paramount importance in individualist cultures.** Words such as *independence, self, privacy,* and *rights* imbue cultural conversations. Competition, not cooperation, is encouraged. Decision making is predicated on what benefits the individual, even if this jeopardizes the group welfare. Individual achievement and initiative are stressed. Self-promotion is expected, even encouraged (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010).

In collectivist cultures, by contrast, commitment to the group is paramount. Words such as *loyalty, responsibility* (to the group welfare), and *community* imbue collectivist cultural conversations. Collectivist cultures have a "We" consciousness. Cooperation within valued groups (family, friends, coworkers, teams) is strongly emphasized, although transactions with groups perceived as outsiders (foreigners, strangers) can become competitive (a threat to a valued group) (Yu, 1998). Individuals often downplay personal goals in favor of advancing the goals of a valued group. Self-promotion is discouraged, and harmony is encouraged (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010).

All cultures have both individualist and collectivist influences, but one tends to predominate over the other. A worldwide study of 50 countries and three geographic areas ranks the United States as the number-one individualistic country, followed by other Western countries such as Australia, Great Britain, and Canada (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010). Evidence shows

Dean Drobot/Shutterstock.com

In an individualist culture such as the United States, you are on your own when interviewing for a job. In collectivist cultures, typically, it is more who you know than how well you sell yourself to a panel.

that the United States is slowly becoming even more individualistic than when this global study was first conducted (Twenge et al., 2017). Latin American, Asian, West and East African countries, such as Guatemala, Ecuador, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Singapore, rank high on collectivism (**see Figure 1.1**). Most people live in collectivist cultures (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010), but one study of 78 countries utilizing 51 years of data found a 12% increase worldwide in individualism. Despite this increase in most cultures studied, "cultural differences remain sizable" (Santos et al., 2017).

Differences on the individualism-collectivism dimension can lead to inappropriate and ineffective communication. For example, when brainstorming ideas in diverse face-to-face small groups or global virtual teams, group members from more individualist cultures such as the United States and Australia tend to voice unfiltered ideas and opinions during brainstorming sessions. Members from more collectivist cultures such as China, Korea, and Taiwan, however, are far more reluctant to contribute, fearful that they will appear superficial or foolish and, consequently, lose face (Toegel & Barsoux, 2016). From the perspective of these Asian cultures, this lopsided difference in brainstorming participation rates can lead to misperceptions that Americans are domineering, rude, and arrogant bullies instead of eager participants. They violate accepted cultural rules with impunity. Conversely, Americans can misperceive these Asian participants as docile, timid, and uncreative. They don't meet American expectations of appropriate behavior.
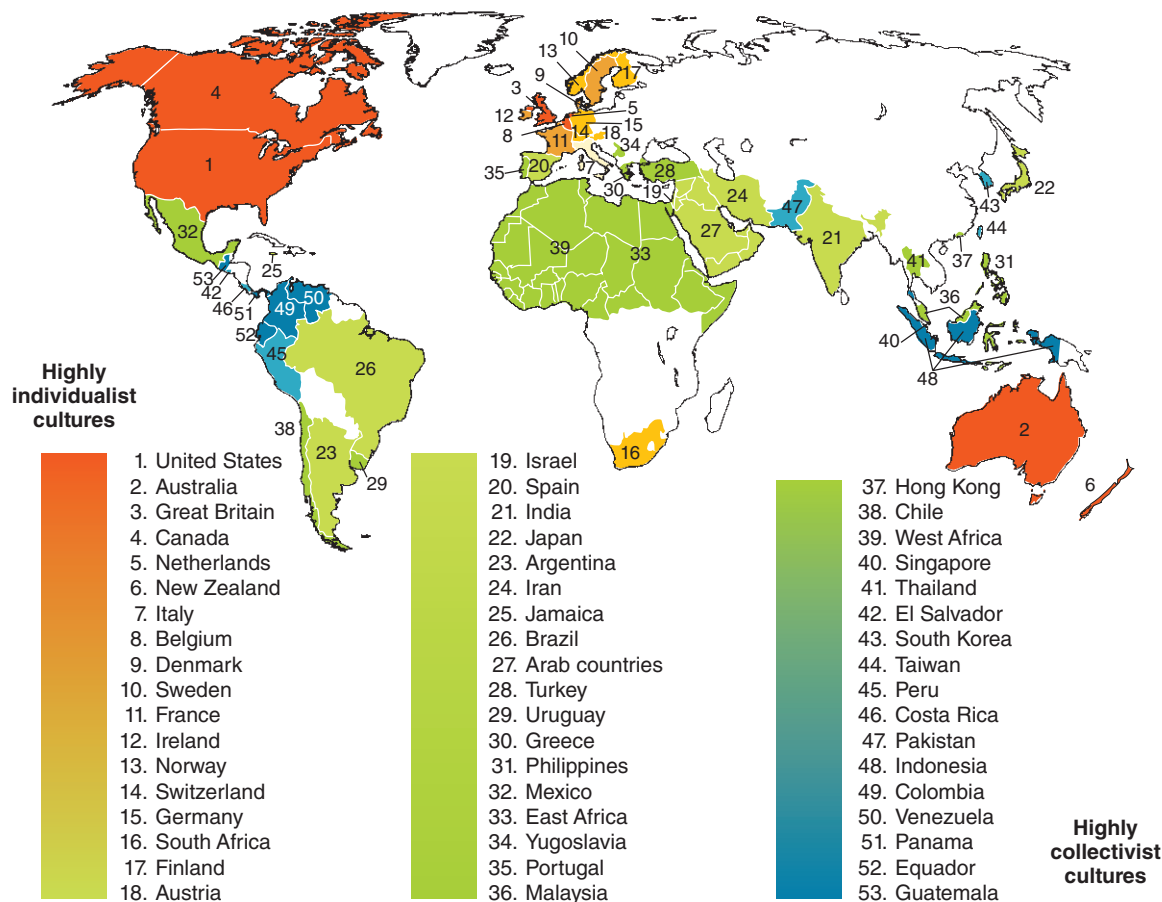
Figure 1.1 Map of individualist and collectivist cultures

So, working in increasingly diverse small groups is a challenge that requires direct application of the communication competence model. **There are several steps that you can take to adapt appropriately and effectively to the challenge of cultural diversity in groups:**

1. *Embrace diversity.* As Henry David Thoreau once said, "It's never too late to give up your prejudices." **Ethnocentrism**—exalting one's own culture while disparaging other cultures (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012)—is prejudice on a culturally grand scale. All cultures are ethnocentric to some degree (Triandis, 2009), but you can recognize it and vow to rise above it. Diversity is part of the colorful tapestry of humankind. Move beyond stultifying stereotypes and personal preferences. Be open to new experiences and views of others.

2. *Reduce uncertainty.* **Uncertainty reduction theory** posits that when strangers first meet (the getting-to-know-you initial phase of group development), the principal goal is to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability (Rahmani, 2017). Uncertainty often produces anxiety. This is especially true in highly diverse small groups, or when you might be the lone member from an individualist culture in an otherwise collectivist-oriented group. We fear embarrassing ourselves or causing offense if we say or do the wrong thing in unfamiliar intercultural situations. Uncertainty reduction can improve the effectiveness of your communication in diverse groups (Neuliep, 2012). Engaging others in conversation is an important way to reduce uncertainty by getting to know others. Ask questions. Explore group members' cultural stories. Be accessible. Demonstrate true interest in another person's culture.

3. *Listen and learn.* "Listen" is an anagram for "silent" (same letters, different words). Too often we are more interested in hearing ourselves talk than in remaining silent, the first step in the listening process. **No one ever insulted individuals from another culture by actively listening to them.** Think about that! It's when we open our mouths or act in inappropriate ways that trouble can emerge. Encourage contributions from group members, and resist interrupting them when they do contribute. Doing a quick "whip-around" in which each team member is given an opportunity to speak in turn before opening a more free-for-all brainstorming session markedly improves brainstorming participation rates among members of collectivist cultures (Aritz & Walker, 2014).

4. *Don't stereotype.* Allow for individual differences. Describing cultures as primarily individualist or collectivist is a generalization that does not accurately reflect every member of a specific culture. The individualist-collectivist dimension is a cultural tendency, not an immutable law.

5. *Employ the Platinum Rule.* The Golden Rule is treat others as you want to be treated. This is a nice sentiment, and it works well in homogeneous (similar membership) groups and cultures. Not everyone, however, wants to be treated the same, especially when cultures clash. "That doesn't bother me; why should it bother you?" and "That wouldn't offend me" are comments that reveal the problem with this rule applied interculturally. The **Platinum Rule** is more useful in multicultural groups: Treat others as they want to be treated (Hall, 2017). In many collectivist cultures, direct eye contact can be perceived as disrespectful, but in individualist cultures shifting your gaze is often perceived as disrespectful, a show of disinterest (Crowley, 2016). You can vary your eye contact depending on the cultural composition of your group and individual interactions.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Be Ye Individualist or Collectivist?

How closely do you personally reflect individualist or collectivist values of your culture or co-culture? Consider the following statements and, using a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*), indicate in the blanks your degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement.*

1. I prefer to be direct and forthright when I talk with people. _____
2. I would do what would please my family, even if I detested that activity. _____
3. I enjoy being unique and different from others in many ways. _____
4. I usually sacrifice my self-interest for the benefit of my group. _____
5. I like my privacy. _____
6. Children should be taught to place duty before pleasure. _____
7. I like to demonstrate my abilities to others. _____
8. I hate to disagree with others in my group. _____
9. When I succeed, it is usually because of my abilities. _____
10. Before taking a major trip, I consult with most members of my family and many friends. _____

Total your score for all odd-numbered statements (1, 3, etc.), then total your score for even-numbered statements (2, 4, etc.). All odd-numbered statements reflect individualism and all even-numbered statements reflect collectivism. Which are you?

For the entire 63-statement measuring instrument, see Triandis (1995).

6. *Learn to style shift.* There are two main communication styles that differentiate individualist and collectivist cultures: low-context and high-context communication (Hall & Hall, 1987). **Low-context communication** is verbally precise, direct, literal, and explicit. A legal contract is an example of low-context communication. Every legal detail is clearly specified, often in dozens, even hundreds of pages. **High-context communication** is indirect, imprecise, and implicit. For example, an indirect verbal expression, such as "I'll think about it," may be a face-saving means of saying no in Japan, or it may be assumed that no verbal expression is required to state what should be obvious from the nonverbal context. You are expected to "read between the lines" by recognizing hints and knowing the cultural context and unspoken rules. If group members are mostly or entirely from individualist cultures, a low-context communication style is appropriate.

If group members are mostly or entirely from collectivist cultures, a more high-context communication style is appropriate. Don't insist on everyone else adapting to your accustomed way of communicating, particularly if you are the lone individualist member in a collectivist group. Be flexible, as persons from collectivist backgrounds must be to adapt to typical American groups with individualist cultural values.

Achieving Communication Competence

Defining communication competence identifies what it is, but not how to achieve it. **There are five general ways to improve your effectiveness and appropriateness in groups:** You can acquire knowledge, hone communication skills, improve your sensitivity, redouble your commitment, and apply ethical standards to your communication choices (**see Figure 1.2**).

Knowledge: Learning the Rules

Knowledge in any communication situation is critical, whether the context is yours or another culture's. **We cannot determine what is appropriate and effective without knowing the rules operating in a given situation.** For example, because harmony and face-saving are highly regarded in collectivist cultures, verbal messages tend to be vague to avoid causing offense. According to Dr. Mona Chung, when a Chinese businessperson says "yes" when queried whether an agreement has been reached following group negotiations "there's about a 20 percent chance yes means they agree" (quoted by Gettler, 2016). The way that "yes" is said, the cadence and the sound may indicate "Yes, because I don't want to say no, and I'll figure that out later on."

Americans tend to view public agreement but private disagreement as deceptive or manipulative. Conversely, imagine how American directness and in-your-face communication are perceived by cultures that strongly value harmony. Knowing the rules, either promoting and respecting harmony or directness in this case, determines what adjustments can advance appropriate and effective communication.

Skills: Showing, Not Just Knowing

Communication competence encompasses the ability to apply your knowledge in actual situations. **To be effective, you must combine knowledge with skill.** Despite the increasing popularity of teams in organizations, researchers have discovered that such groups are often unsuccessful

Figure 1.2 Communication Competence Model

because members lack teamwork knowledge *and* skill (Hollenbeck et al., 2004; Marks et al., 2002). They may know what to do but not how to do it skillfully.

A **communication skill** is the ability to perform a communication behavior effectively and repeatedly. Practice, of course, is essential to the mastery of any communication skill. Group members who are trained and practice together acquire skills and improve group performance (Ellis et al., 2005). Business consultant Greg Satell (2015) claims that "communication is today's most important skill." An annual survey of more than 400 employers ranked verbal communication as the most important skill for job candidates, followed closely by an ability to work in teams ("Employers," 2016).

Sensitivity: Receptive Accuracy

Having the knowledge to determine what constitutes appropriate communication in a specific context and having the skills to be effective are great, but what if you aren't attentive to signals from group members that indicate hostility, tension, anger, irritation, disgust, or uneasiness? **Sensitivity** is also important. Sensitivity is receptive accuracy whereby you can detect, decode, and comprehend signals and emotional cues sent within groups (Bernieri, 2001).

Failure to attend to and comprehend signals can severely affect group performance (Hall & Bernieri, 2001). Sensitivity is even more important than the general intelligence of group members. Google conducted a huge study called Project Aristotle and found that members of effective teams had high scores on sensitivity; members of ineffective teams had low scores (Duhigg, 2016). Women exhibit a greater facility for sensitivity, so including women in task-oriented groups is highly advisable (Woolley et al., 2010).

Dr. Louisa Parks of the Brain Health Center at California Pacific Medical Center notes that people are spending so much time on social networking devices instead of face-to-face interactions that "the ability to recognize things like sarcasm, humor, or even the emotions on a human face" are on the wane (quoted in Brown, 2013, p. A16). Fortunately, sensitivity can be learned, especially if we give social media a rest (Hall & Bernieri, 2001). One of the functions of this text is to assist you in developing greater sensitivity by identifying patterns of communication that pose problems in group transactions and by providing solutions.

Commitment: A Passion for Excellence

Effectiveness requires commitment. **Commitment** is persistent effort to achieve goals and produce excellence. Little that is worthwhile comes

without commitment. **The predominant motivation of the competent communicator is the desire to avoid previous mistakes and to find better ways of communicating with group members.** Someone who makes the same mistakes repeatedly and shows little interest in altering his or her behavior is a nuisance or, worse, a deadweight who can sink a group.

Commitment to improving your communication effectiveness requires self-monitoring. When you interact in groups, be a **participant-observer.** Assume a detached view of yourself. Analyze your communication behavior; look for areas to improve while noting successes. Ultimately, the competent communicator considers it a personal responsibility to make the necessary effort to interact with group members as effectively and productively as possible.

Ethics: The Right and Wrong of Communication

Appropriateness and the We-orientation of effectiveness make considering ethics important. Competent communicators concern themselves with more than what works for them personally. Lying, cheating, and abusing others to gain group leadership, for example, is self-oriented and reprehensible. This violates standards of ethics.

Ethics is a system for judging the moral correctness of human behavior by weighing that behavior against an agreed-upon set of standards of what constitutes right and wrong. Five essential values, based on the Credo for Ethical Communication adopted by the National Communication Association (www.natcom.org), constitute the set of standards for judging the moral correctness of our communication behavior. They are as follows:

1. *Honesty.* "There is no more fundamental ethical value than honesty" (Josephson, 2002). Unfortunately, the demand for honesty often exceeds the supply. "Indeed, lying is so commonplace in corporations that it often passes without comment" (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2016, p. 53).
2. *Respect.* Relationships in groups fall apart, and groups can't function effectively when members show disrespect for each other (Gastil et al., 2008). One survey by the Josephson Institute of Ethics reported that 99% of respondents rated respect as "very important" or "essential" to them, and treating others with respect received a similar rating (Jarc, 2012).
3. *Fairness.* Students recognize immediately how unfair it would be if an instructor gave a better grade to some project groups in class and penalized others based on their sex, ethnicity, age, or lifestyle. Everyone should play by the same rules. One study of community college students reported that fairness was perceived to be "very important" or "extremely important" by most respondents (Kidder et al., 2002).

4. *Choice.* Freedom to choose for oneself without threat of force or intimidation is a basic ethical value (Jaksa & Pritchard, 1994). It is why most nations have outlawed torture. **Coercion**—forced choice—prevents free choice. There is no real option presented. Choice goes hand in hand with honesty. If you fear reprisals for telling the truth, then your freedom to choose truthfulness instead of deceit is compromised.

5. *Responsibility.* Every group member has a responsibility, a duty, to be concerned about more than merely what works to achieve personal or even group goals. How goals are achieved is also a vital consideration. The study of community college students previously cited reported the highest score among a list of choices was for the importance of responsibility as a "moral value" (Kidder et al., 2002).

These general ethical values serve as guidelines for appropriate communication behavior. **Group communication is so complex, however, that any list of standards used to judge members' communication ethics, applied absolutely, would immediately create problems.** Ethical communication is a matter of context. A lie that accuses a member of your study group of cheating on a test is different from a lie that covers up an embarrassing event that is private and none of the group's business. Exceptions also will inevitably surface. Students don't have complete freedom of choice. Few would freely take a public speaking course even to improve important group presentations unless mandated by general education requirements because most people fear giving speeches. Honesty, respect, fairness, choice, and responsibility, however, are strong values in most cultures, and they should act as basic standards for evaluating our communication.

Definition of a Group

Both communication and communication competence have been defined. In this section, for clarification, the definition of a group is offered and distinguished from interpersonal communication and public speaking.

Groups: More than Standing at a Bus Stop

A **group** is a human communication system composed of three or more individuals, interacting for the achievement of some common goal(s), who influence and are influenced by each other. **The achievement of a goal can be an adversarial or collaborative communication process, but in either case members interact and influence each other attempting to achieve a desired goal.**

SECOND LOOK

Groups versus Aggregations

Groups	Aggregations
Crowd doing "the wave"	Crowd in a shopping mall
Cheerleading squad performing	Individuals waiting for cheerleading tryouts
Crossing guard leading children	Children waiting at stop signal to cross street
Jury deliberating	Individuals waiting for jury duty assignment

A group is different from a mere collection of individuals, called an **aggregation** (Goldhaber, 1990). Twenty-five people standing in line to buy tickets for a movie are not a group, but simply an aggregation. Because they do not interact with and influence each other to achieve a common goal (strangers standing in line are not there expressly to help each other secure tickets), they do not qualify as a group. The same holds for a crowd shopping in a mall or waiting for a plane departure delayed by fog, or people sitting on benches in a public park. In such cases, the presence of other people is irrelevant to the achievement of the specific goal (buying clothes, traveling from point A to point B, or enjoying the outdoors). Crowds, of course, can become groups if they satisfy the definition provided (e.g., flash mob).

This text will focus on *small* groups. **Trying to draw a clear line between small and large groups, however, can prove to be difficult.** When does the

Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock.com

A mere collection of people is not a group. They can be in proximity to each other but unless they are interacting to achieve a common goal, then they are called an aggregation.

addition of one more member transform a small group into a large one? When you attend a group meeting and you can't remember afterward whether some members were even present, you've probably reached large-group status. When groups grow to the point where problems of coordination emerge and formal rules for discussion and debate (parliamentary procedure) during meetings become necessary, the group can reasonably be designated as large.

Interpersonal Communication and Public Speaking: Ungroups

Communication between only two individuals is usually referred to as **interpersonal,** or **dyadic, communication.** Distinguishing interpersonal communication and group communication, however, is more than numerical. **There is an important qualitative dimension as well** (Moreland, 2010). As most couples experience, interpersonal communication between spouses is massively changed with the addition of a child. In such cases, three individuals seem like many more than two. Communication between two individuals is far less complex than the complicated network of transactions found in groups of three or more. Thus, the unit of analysis is structurally different when focusing on three or more individuals, not just two (see Chapter 2 for more detailed discussion). Coalition formation and majority–minority influence occur in groups, not dyads. **A group dynamic seems to begin with no fewer than three individuals.** For example, one study showed that two individuals working together to solve a complex problem performed no better than two individuals working apart. Three individuals working together, however, proved to be the point at which superior problem-solving begins (Laughlin et al., 2006). I doubt that you would deem it unusual to refer to a family as a group, but you might think it odd to label a married or dating couple as a group. We typically say, "They're such a cute couple" but not "They're such a cute group." The dynamics between two people are qualitatively different from the dynamics experienced among three or more people.

Group communication is also distinct from public speaking. **Public speaking** involves a clearly indicated speaker and an audience, and the speaking situation is far more formal than what is usually found in group discussions. Verbal feedback is often delayed in public speaking events, but during group discussions verbal feedback often is almost immediate. Public speakers usually prepare remarks in advance and speak from notes or even a manuscript. Group members usually don't make formal preparations to speak during group discussions but may do so when participating on group panels, symposiums, or public forums (**see Appendix A for details**).

In summary, human communication is a transactional process of sharing meaning with others. Communication competence, a recurring theme throughout this book, is communicating effectively and appropriately in a given context. It is achieved generally through knowledge, skills, sensitivity, commitment, and ethics. Learning to communicate competently in groups is of vital importance to all of us. With this as a backdrop, let's explore in the next chapter how groups function as systems.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKERS

1. Are there any circumstances in which a Me-orientation becomes necessary when participating in a small group?
2. Does competent communication ever necessitate dishonesty? Explain.
3. Should you always exhibit commitment to the group, or are there exceptions? Explain.

VIDEO CASE STUDIES

This activity presents video case studies from a variety of films for you to analyze. A movie rating (PG-13, R, etc.) and category (drama, romantic comedy, etc.) are included to help you decide which movies are suitable for your viewing. You are asked to analyze each video case study, applying key material presented in each chapter.

Brooklyn (2015). *Drama/Romance; PG-13*

Outstanding tale of an Irish immigrant trying to make her way in 1950s Brooklyn. Identify and analyze the rules that operate both interpersonally and in groups. What impact do these rules have on communication behavior? What are the consequences of rules violations?

Gung Ho (1985). *Comedy/Drama*

An automobile plant in a small town is rescued by Japanese ownership and an imported management team. Analyze this for teamwork and team building in the context of cultural differences. How do differences in individualism and collectivism affect group effectiveness?

Return to Paradise (1998). *Drama; R*

Underrated film about a harrowing ethical dilemma involving three friends who vacationed in Malaysia. Analyze this film from a communication ethics perspective. Is Anne Heche's character justified in lying to the Vince Vaughn character? Does Vince Vaughn's character have a choice, or is he being coerced unethically? Does he have a responsibility to return to save his friend?

The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013).
Action-Adventure; PG-13

Katnis (Jennifer Lawrence) and Peeta (Josh Hutcherson) become enemies of the Capitol and must participate in a second Hunger Games pitting previous winners against each other. Examine the ethics of the Hunger Games participants, applying the five standards of ethical group communication. Identify instances in which communication is interpersonal and when it is small group. Are participants ever just an aggregation?

Groups as Systems

In one of my small group communication courses, six women formed a project group. During their first meeting in class, communication was warm, friendly, and task oriented. They accomplished a great deal in a short period of time: deciding which of the five project options they would pursue, dividing labor to develop the project, and setting deadlines for accomplishment of specified tasks. They said they all were very pleased with their new group.

During the next week, the six women met one more time for a lengthy session, and again they were pleased by their progress on the project and increasingly comfortable with their harmonious interactions. Then a male student who had missed a week of class and had no project group approached me and asked which of the four class groups he should join. I told him to join the all-women group for two reasons: I typically encourage mixed-sex, not same-sex, groups (there were far more women than men in the class), and the other groups had seven members already. From the moment he joined the six women, he transformed this harmonious, task-effective group into a frustrating experience for every group member. His opening introductory remark upon joining the group of women was, "I hope PMS won't be a problem for us." He guffawed at his supposed humor, but all six women seemed stunned. During the group meeting he made sexist remarks, offered derogatory comments about the choice of project already decided by the women, and made a complete nuisance of himself. As he left class, he loudly proclaimed to everyone that he was "leader of a chicks group."

All six women bolted to the front of the class and asked me to assign this disruptive individual to another group. I explained that moving him would make the other groups too large and would merely pass the problem to another group, not solve it. I noted that this was an opportunity to experiment with communication strategies for dealing with difficult members, but I gave them a choice: I could "rescue" them by intervening, or I could let them handle their bad apple without my interference. To their credit, they chose the latter.

This example illustrates that every group is a system. A **system** is a set of interconnected parts working together to form a whole in the context of a changing environment (Littlejohn et al., 2017). A group is composed of individual members interrelating with each other—not as individual parts operating in isolation from

each other but as a unit. The behavior of one member affects the entire group because of the interconnectedness of system parts (all group members), especially if the behavior is disruptive. In this opening case, the six women had to adapt to the jarring change introduced by their disruptor. He changed the group environment, and the communication dynamics also changed from warm and friendly to defensive and strained.

In general, a system is composed of input, throughput (processes), and output (Katz & Kahn, 1978). **Input** consists of resources that come from outside the system, such as energy (sunlight, electricity), information (Internet, books), people (a new group member), and environmental influences (organizations, society, culture). **If input ceases, a system deceases.** A system inevitably wears down without continuous input. This wearing-down process is called **entropy**—a measure of a system's movement toward disorganization and eventual termination. **All living systems combat entropy with input.** No group, for example, can survive without new members. The group will dismantle because current members will lose interest and leave to join different groups or the members themselves will eventually die.

Consider the religious sect called the Shakers (members shook to rid themselves of evil). Now near extinction, two Shaker decisions foreordained their inevitable demise: a belief in celibacy and a group decision in 1965 to admit no new members. From a peak membership of 6,000 in the 1830s, there were only two remaining members at the Sabbath Day Lake, New Gloucester, Maine, community in 2017 (Blakemore, 2017). Contrary to the Shakers' aversion to new members, interjecting "new blood" into a group can bring new information, new ideas, new experiences, new energy, and even different values and perspectives. New members can thwart entropy, energize and revitalize a group. New members, however, can also shake up the system by disrupting traditions and stable patterns of behavior—undesirable eventualities from the Shaker point of view.

Throughput is the *process* of transforming input into output to keep the system functioning. Input is transformed in a group by its members engaging in communication activities, such as presenting information during group discussion and then taking that information and engaging in creative problem solving. According to **structuration theory,** a system, such as a small group, establishes structures for such discussion and problem solving in the form of rules, roles, norms, and power distribution (all subjects for later development) (Poole et al., 1996). These structures are used to permit the system (the small group) to function effectively and to sustain itself. These structures, however, also constrain the process (West & Turner, 2014). For example, establishing rules for group discussion (e.g., "Meetings will follow a prepared agenda"; "The chairperson will lead the group discussion"; "Interruptions will be kept to a minimum") permits an orderly dialogue to occur among group members—it gives it a clear form.