11

Communicating in Groups

Applications and Skills

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We dedicate this book to our students,
who teach us as much as we teach them.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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PREFACE

If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

African proverb

As we prepare this revision, the world seems to be falling apart—mass shootings in Texas and Las Vegas; a trucker mowing down families in Nice, France; the Syrian crisis uprooting over half of its country's population. We humans somehow need to push the reset button on how we interact with one another and how we work together. Some of these despicable actions are the work of lone, disaffected individuals, but it is also true that many disaffected individuals are encouraged by groups working to disrupt a way of life they dislike. Much of what happens in our world—good and bad—is the result of decisions made in groups, projects conceived in and implemented by groups, and solutions developed by groups. To us, it is more important than ever that we figure out how to work with others who often see the world differently from us, may not share our values, and have different approaches to work. The authors have experienced the variety that groups have to offer, from groups that made us feel alive and productive to groups that made us want to pull our hair out. In this book, we hope to give students the tools to help them make their group experiences good ones by providing insights about how groups work and practical suggestions for applying those insights.

This book is designed for the first- or second-year student who may not have had a prior communication course and who may never take a subsequent one—but who *must* work in groups because that is the nature of corporate, educational, and civic participation in this day and age. Two overarching goals guide our writing. First, being able to work effectively in groups is not a luxury—it's a necessity. Our introductory students want to cut to the chase; they want to know what works *right now.* That is the reason for our distinctly *practical* focus in *Communicating in Groups.* Although this text uses the same research foundation as our more advanced text, *Effective Group Discussion,* we strive here to provide information in a way that is both useful and immediately usable. Second, we want students to recognize that effective group work is, to a great extent, a matter of *communication behavior,* not a matter of personality or fate. Thus, group member behaviors are what create particular group experiences. We want students to start thinking about their own communicative choices in groups and to have the tools to make wise choices so they can make the groups they belong to as rewarding and productive as possible.

To meet our goals, we use an informal writing style and provide many examples from our own and others' experiences. We also report research findings in much less detail, with more synthesis and distillation of findings, fewer footnotes, and less evaluation of competing theories than in our other text. This allows readers to focus on what is usually more important to them—the practical application of the research. Finally, we refer to ourselves frequently throughout the text. We think of our readers as individuals with whom we are on a first-name basis, and we encourage you to think of us the same way, as if we were members of the same small group.

Overview of the Text

With each revision, the hardest thing we have to do is decide what to retain and what to cut out. We try to focus on what we believe are the most important concepts, particularly those that will be most useful and practical for students to understand. General systems theory and a transactional approach to communication continue to ground our view of small group communication. We remain focused on updating the use of technologies by small groups and add material on cultural dynamics relevant to group dynamics. As before, the chapters are ordered in a way that is logical to us but that does not preclude other methods of organizing a small group course. Each chapter is self-contained and can be read in an order different from what we provide here.

Part One provides basic information students need to understand how groups function. Chapter 1 introduces some basic terms encountered throughout the book, shows how to classify groups according to their major purpose, and introduces the concept of ethical communication behavior of group members. Chapter 2 presents general systems theory as a framework for understanding the complexity of group communication. We provide specific illustrations of systems concepts throughout the rest of the book as well.

Part Two provides the foundation for understanding communication in groups. Chapter 3 discusses basic communication theory, including what constitutes transactional communication and effective listening. Chapter 4 details verbal and nonverbal messages as well as compares computer-mediated communication with face-to-face communication.

Part Three explores in detail how we move from being individuals to connecting as a group. Chapter 5 explains how a group develops as a team from an initial collection of individuals. Chapter 6 focuses on how groups can work effectively with multiple levels of diversity: member motivation, learning styles, personality, cognitive/informational differences, culture, gender, ethnicity, and generational.

Part Four focuses on the group's throughput processes. Chapter 7 discusses the creative and critical thinking skills necessary for effective group problem solving. We believe creative and critical thinking are at the heart of the group problem-solving process and that students should know something about these processes before understanding problem solving in general. Chapter 8 describes the problem-solving process and introduces the procedural model of problem solving as a helpful guideline to follow. Chapter 9 explains why group conflicts occur and how they can be managed so that the group benefits instead of suffers. Chapter 10 provides a comprehensive picture of leadership and also gives suggestions for applying leadership principles effectively and ethically.

Part Five, which can be found online within the Instructors Resources in Connect, presents information about oral presentations, the culmination of much group effort. In Chapter 11 students will learn about the types of oral presentations, ways to prepare effective presentations, and criteria for evaluating presentations.

Finally, the **Appendix** presents information about a number of techniques a member or outside observer can use to gather information about a problem-solving group and help it improve its performance.

New to This Edition

- Throughout the text, we have streamlined the examples and removed redundancies.
- We have added information about the lone wolf in Chapter 1. In addition, we have incorporated a discussion of the Five-Factor Model of Personality into Chapters 2, 6, and 10. Generation Z has been added to Chapter 6.
- We acknowledge that groups are no longer *either* face-to-face *or* virtual, but that they use a variety of technologies to help them get their work done.
- We emphasize the processes of dealing with group conflict and deemphasize the identification of type of conflict.
- Leadership discussion broadened to include material on leader qualities that impact member perceptions of leadership. Add tips on leading virtual group meetings.
- Case studies, Apply Now examples, and discussion examples are updated.

Features

Case Studies: Establish the main ideas of the chapter by providing realistic scenarios for student application, and utilizing a variety of group contexts, such as business, health care, social groups, and civic organizations.

Apply Now Boxes: Make concepts practical to everyday life, throughout the text.

Ethical Dilemma Boxes: Encourage critical evaluation of typical ethical scenarios faced by groups, and stimulate discussion of their causes, controversies, issues, and solutions.

Media and Technology Boxes: Look at how media and technology are changing the ways in which small groups can interact. Topics include online support groups, the contemporary media's effect on groupthink, and presentation technology.

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- An Instructor's Manual that includes exercises and sample syllabi.
- A full Test Bank of multiple-choice questions that test students on central concepts and ideas in each chapter.
- Lecture Slides for instructor use in class.

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We wish to thank the reviewers, all of whom did a conscientious job of reading the manuscript and providing helpful suggestions. We appreciate their thoughtful suggestions and have incorporated many of them in this eleventh edition.

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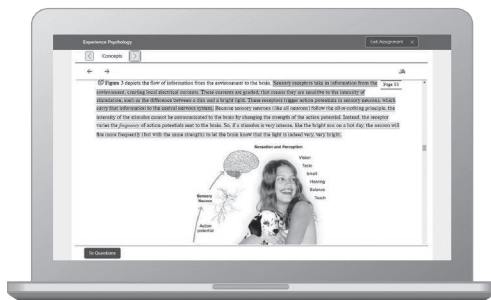
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PART ONE

Introducing the Small Group

Part One introduces you to the study of small groups. In Chapter 1 we explain why small groups are important to understand, and we define many of the terms you will encounter in your study of small groups. We discuss the types of small groups you are likely to experience, the ethics of participating in small groups, and the participant-observer perspective we use throughout the book. Chapter 2 presents you with a popular framework, general systems theory, to help keep track of the many concepts important to understanding how groups function. Our main goal is practical—we want you to become an effective group member and leader.

CHAPTER

1

Small Groups as the Heart of Society

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

1. Explain why groups play a vital role in our personal and professional lives.

2. List the reasons for selecting a group or an individual to solve a problem.

3. Define a group, a small group, a team, and small group communication.

4. Describe how groups use technology to enhance their interactions.

5. Explain the major reasons why people participate in small groups.

6. Describe and give examples of primary groups.

7. Describe and give examples of secondary groups.

8. Compare and contrast the different organizational groups.

9. Explain the four ethical standards group members should exhibit.

10. Explain and give examples of a member being an effective participant-observer.

The Best Friends Animal Society

Sinjin the cat was near death when he arrived at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Angel Canyon, Utah.[1] Someone had set him on fire after dousing him with gasoline, badly burning three-quarters of his body. The care at Best Friends, however, pulled him through; Sinjin the one-eyed cat became a sleek, confident creature who loved his treats! Best Friends Animal Society runs the largest no-kill animal sanctuary in the world, averaging 1,600 animals a day in shelters all over the country. Best Friends has been a prime mover in the No More Homeless Pets movement, promotes spay-neuter programs and no-kill animal shelters, provides consultation services all over the world for those who want to set up no-kill shelters and spay-neuter programs in their communities, offers internships for veterinary students, runs a large volunteer program, provides wildlife rehabilitation, schedules educational programs and seminars, and, of course, takes in abandoned animals. What does this have to do with small groups? Best Friends Animal Society started out, nearly 50 years ago, as a small group of friends on a quest for spiritual fulfillment.

In the 1960s a group of friends from Great Britain traveled together to the Bahamas, Mexico, the United States, and Europe seeking a meaningful life. These diverse individuals were bound together by what members called the Universal Law and what we know as the Golden Rule: "As you give, so shall you receive. So do unto others as you would have them do unto you."[2] The "others" included animals. Although individual members ended up living in different places, they stayed in touch, with their love of animals the constant that united them. In 1982 the opportunity arose to buy 3,000 acres in Angel Canyon for an animal sanctuary. A core group of 20 members pooled their personal resources to establish what would ultimately become Best Friends. The group included an architect, an artist, a real estate professional, several community organizers, and workers from another animal sanctuary run by some of the members. Over the years the group has learned (among other things) to build dwellings, raise funds, tend sick and injured animals, and communicate with the media. The sanctuary is now considered a "rock star" by animal rescue activists. Fifteen of the original members remain active, but new members have joined to contribute their expertise and energy.

The true story of Best Friends illustrates vividly what Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."[3] This group of individuals, united by a vision of a world in which animals are respected and loved, shows what a small group can accomplish that an individual could never hope to achieve alone. The group demonstrates qualities that characterize effective group behavior: Members had a vision for what they wanted to accomplish; they appreciated and used the many different talents of their members; they trusted each other to work for the good of the group (and the animals); leadership was shared among them, as different needs and challenges arose; and the group continued to learn and develop by setting new goals that would increasingly stretch the abilities of its members. We will share throughout this text what you can do to achieve success like this. The glue that holds a group together and enables it to do its work is *communication*.

The group that formed and continues to oversee Best Friends is a voluntary group of members who choose to work together. However, many of the groups you belong to, especially where you work or study, may not be voluntary. You may be assigned to a group because you have a particular expertise the group needs or because small groups are a part of a course you are taking. No matter what the reason, you must be able to work well in teams, task forces, committees, and all kinds of special problem-solving groups if you want to succeed in the world today. In fact, Monster.com, a popular employment website geared to college students, notes that teamwork is one of the seven "hot skills" most employers want, no matter their size or type of industry.[4] Moreover, students are reminded that they can develop this skill during college. They go on to recommend that all freshman students join a club to build their group skills.[5]

Teams of all kinds are common in all areas of American life: business, industry, education, health care, the nonprofit sector, and government. That's because teams can be more effective than individuals. *Time* magazine notes that cancer will be defeated not by a lone hero scientist, but by teams of scientists working on different aspects of this complex set of diseases.[6] The biggest companies in the United States realize the significance of effective teamwork to their bottom line.[7] Time spent in company collaborative projects has exploded to over 50 percent. Being able to work effectively in a team is also expected in many professions. Medical schools, for instance, screen their applicants not just by grades but by their communication skills.[8] Prospective medical students in a series of mini-interviews must interact with mock patients so the evaluators can assess their social skills. Why is this important? According to the article, "medicine is evolving from an individual to a team sport," with teams coordinating patient care. The effectiveness of the teams depends as much on members' communication skills as on their expertise.

There's a trade-off, however, to small group work. In one study of 179 teams, only 13 percent were rated highly effective.[9] Collaboration tends to overwork those who are more than eager to help and can lead to their burnout.[10] One management consultant estimates that the average meeting in a large company costs approximately $15,000. Ineffectively run meetings have huge consequences not just financially but also on the health of both the company and its employees.[11] Finally, the social feedback you receive in meetings, such as being in the presence of someone you think is smarter than you, can make you both feel and act brain dead![12]

Effective small group work—whether in meetings, on teams, or on committees—cannot be left to chance. When individuals come together, with differing backgrounds, perspectives, and areas of expertise, teamwork doesn't just happen. People *must* learn to be effective team members. Chapter 1 will help you start this process by asking you to consider how important groups are in your own life and by introducing you to concepts central to understanding small group processes, the variety of groups you will encounter, and the importance of being an ethical participant-observer in groups.

Groups in Your Life

Lawrence Frey, a leading advocate for studying small groups in their natural settings, believes that the small group is *the* most important social formation: "From birth to death, small groups are interwoven into the fabric of our lives."[13] Family in many ways forms the foundation for other groups that follow. Consider how much your family has influenced who you are today. Development and maintenance of identity remain important functions that only groups can provide for us. This is obvious when we consider groups such as fraternities or sororities, spiritually based groups (churches, synagogues, other religious organizations, and even spiritually guided activist groups like Best Friends), gangs, book clubs, and poker clubs. Groups formed at work also contribute to who we think we are. Are you a member of a union, for example? A management group? A classroom group? A neighborhood coalition trying to prevent rezoning in your neighborhood? Each of these groups will affect how you see yourself in relation to other people.

Professionally, the higher you go in any organization (e.g., government, service, manufacturing, education, communications, or the military), you will need to know how to behave in ways that are appropriate and helpful to the group and to any larger organization to which the group may be attached. If you don't work well in groups, you are more likely to be laid off or frozen at a low-level job. A survey of 750 leading American companies asked businesspeople to describe characteristics of the ideal MBA (Master of Business Administration) graduate.[14] The top preference was possession of good oral and written communication skills (listed by 83.5 percent of respondents). The fourth-ranked preference, the ability to work in teams, was listed by 71.4 percent. These communication skills far surpassed even cutting-edge knowledge of the company's field (14.8 percent) and previous work experience (31.9 percent) in importance.

Students are often surprised to discover just how many groups they belong to. Humans are social beings with powerful genetic needs to belong and affiliate with others of our kind.

GROUPS AS PROBLEM SOLVERS

You are constantly solving problems: how to find a job, where to eat lunch, how to keep your car running on a limited budget, and even how to keep your company on the cutting edge of its industry in a turbulent economic climate. Solving any problem means coming up with a plan and executing it. All of us expect to be included in planning solutions to problems that affect us, and most of this planning occurs in small groups.

PARTICIPATING IN GROUPS

Improving group problem solving requires a focus both on the logic behind problem solving and the emotions that are often a part of the process. Effective group problem solving depends on how well members understand and manage such things as informational resources, how members feel about each other and their task, how skilled they are at expressing themselves and listening to others, and how well they collectively process their information.

Group members must make sure they have the materials (information, tangible resources, time, and so forth) to complete the task, and ability to manage their interpersonal relationships effectively enough to complete the task well. Thus, group communication performs two key functions: It accomplishes the group's task, and it creates "the social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among members."[15] This function—the group's relational communication—is just as important as the task-oriented functions of group work.

Samantha Glen's book about Best Friends describes several vivid examples of communication that convey just how much members of this group care about each other and how they express it.[16] At various times several members of the Best Friends core group encountered problems that seemed overwhelming and faced the real threat of burnout as they tried, in the early days, to keep the sanctuary running with little help, less money, and the ever-growing population of animals others had thrown away. In one encounter Faith, a core group member, lost it when she publicly confronted a prominent,

The Instinctive Need to Group Together

MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

Some scholars have assessed situations in which a collection of individuals begins to group together. Such effort is common in face-to-face interaction where a particular force, problem, or crisis has created the need for individuals to group. Yet little is known about how and why individuals with nothing apparently in common or with no mediating force begin to group. A good example is in a computer-mediated environment.

To examine this unique grouping process, Tom Postmes, Russell Spears, and Martin Lea collected data on students who volunteered to complete an online statistics course, which offered participants email options for contacting staff. Participants also used the function to send about 1,200 emails to fellow students. The messages were later classified into nine categories reflecting both task and relational functions (e.g., requests, complaints, reactions, humor, emotion, personal revelations). The researchers found that 11 groups formed, in which members spent most of their time (74 percent) interacting about socio-personal topics (reactions to contributions of other group members, humorous contributions, displays of affection and emotion). Despite having little impact on the successful completion of the course, these students grouped together to fulfill their need for relational interaction with fellow classmates.

SOURCE: T. Postmes, R. Spears, and M. Lea, "The Formation of Group Norms in Computer-Mediated Communication," *Human Communication Research* 26 (2001), pp. 341–71.

well-respected local man who had adopted a puppy from the sanctuary but then abandoned it by the side of the road. Fellow group member, Michael, gently but firmly made Faith face the fact that she was getting burned out and needed help. His obvious concern allowed Faith to realize how deep her exhaustion was and to accept help from the others. In another example, the group's veterinarian, Bill, brought two gifts to the sanctuary: an Airstream trailer, accepted in lieu of payment from a client, that would serve as dedicated space for an operating table, and a goat to keep Sparkle the horse company while her leg healed. Faith, expressing the whole group's gratitude, said to Bill, "We love you, you know."[17] This communication, while, not typical of what you hear in most work groups, conveys appreciation, gratitude, and liking and goes a long way in creating a deeply satisfying group that is also a community. The Best Friends group succeeded because members focused on *both* task *and* relationship aspects of working in teams.

Groups versus Individuals as Problem Solvers

If group work can be challenging and at times complicated, why not have *individuals* plan the solutions to all problems? The benefits of having a group tackle a problem *can* (but not necessarily *will*) outweigh the costs in time and tensions.

Group solutions can be far more effective than individual ones for solving many types of problems.[18] Groups tend to do much better than individuals when several alternative solutions to the problem exist, none of which is known to be superior or "correct." They also are better at tasks where no one person has all the information needed to solve a problem, but each member has some needed information.[19] For example, escape rooms—where a group is locked in a room and must solve a puzzle in a fixed amount of time to escape—require the skills and talents of each member to crack the puzzle in time.[20]

Many college courses require small group activities when instructors move from teacher-centered to more student-centered instruction. Students become active, not passive, learners.[21] Students can improve problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and social skills in small group learning contexts. In fact, MBA programs widely use study groups to teach their students group dynamics.[22] Moreover, group activity is a preferred way to learn for some cultures (e.g., Asians, Native Americans, African Americans, and females).[23]

The Best Friends story illustrates how a group's greater resources help solve problems. Of the friends who bought Angel Canyon, one was an architect and several had rudimentary construction skills—enough to design and build places for the animals and shelter for themselves. The friends were also committed to the animals and willing to work, including feeding the growing number of animals twice daily and taking animals to public events where they might be adopted. Bill, local veterinarian, initially provided low-cost spay-neutering and other veterinary care services. Best Friends now has a veterinary internship program with much expanded animal care. Estelle, who had polio as a child and thus was unable to perform physical labor, had experience running an office and provided administrative services. Matthias, a technical whiz, used his expertise to set up a membership database and to organize the sanctuary's records. Jana used her photography skills to take pictures of the animals and increase the likelihood that they would be adopted. In recent years, Best Friends has used many different kinds of expertise to expand the reach of what it can do for animals: *National Geographic* produced a television series about Dogtown. Wildlife rehabilitation specialists work with injured wild animals to return them to the wild or, if that is not possible, to use

them in educational programs. Volunteer coordinators work with the many people who come to Best Friends to volunteer their efforts as dog feeders, poop scoopers, trainers, foster parents, and so forth. Others work with sanctuaries across the country to help establish no-kill shelters nationwide. The Best Friends website is remarkable and frequently updated with stories of the animals. One person working alone could never have accomplished all of this.

WHEN A GROUP IS A GOOD CHOICE

Groups working on problems with multiple solutions typically make higher-quality decisions than do individuals for several reasons. Groups usually have a much larger number of possible solutions from which to choose. Group members can help each other correct one another's misinformation, faulty assumptions, and invalid reasoning. Several people can often think of issues to be handled in the process of solving a problem that might be overlooked by any one member. In addition, several people can conduct more thorough investigative research than one person working alone. Group members often counteract each other's tendencies to engage in self-defeating behavior.[24] Group participation can also enhance the decision-making and problem-solving abilities of each individual member.[25]

Doctors at the University of Michigan studied the value of a multidisciplinary team approach to providing breast cancer patients with a second opinion.[26] Patients who were diagnosed with breast cancer and whose doctors had recommended a course of treatment were referred for a second opinion to a team that included a variety of cancer treatment specialists: a radiologist, surgeon, pathologist, medical oncologist, and radiation oncologist. The team met, usually with the patient, to discuss options. Over half the time, the team recommended an approach different from that proposed by the original physician. Sometimes, a team member was aware of new treatment protocols or techniques the original doctor hadn't known. Other times, the original doctor had not followed national treatment guidelines. Having qualified, dedicated team members work together to address an important issue can produce better results.

A further advantage to group problem solving is that members who are involved in solving a problem or planning a procedure usually understand that procedure and work hard to implement it. In addition, people are more likely to accept a solution they had a hand in designing. Satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, and learning tend to be higher when people have a voice. This is clearly evident with the Best Friends group, who continue to expand their skills, stretch their comfort zones, and care for one another as they care for the animals. These principles have resulted in such small group techniques as self-managed work groups and collaborative learning groups.

WHEN A GROUP IS NOT A GOOD CHOICE

Not all problems are suitable for groups, nor is using a group always a wise or productive use of time. When a problem has a best or correct solution (such as an arithmetic or accounting task), a skilled person working alone often performs better than a group of less-knowledgeable people, even if the group includes the highly skilled person as a member. When conditions are changing rapidly (as in a weather disaster, battle, or ballgame), coordinating the work of several people may be done best by one person (a commander, chief, or coach). Likewise, if small groups have certain social, procedural, or personality-mix

TABLE 1.1	**Problems Appropriate for Groups versus Individuals**
Problems Suitable for a Group	**Problems Suitable for an Individual**
• The problem is complex; one person is not likely to have all relevant information. • There are several acceptable solutions, and one best solution does not exist. • Acceptance of the solution by those who are affected is critical. • Sufficient time exists for a group to meet and discuss and analyze the problem.	• There is a best solution, and a recognized expert is most qualified to determine that solution. • Conditions are changing rapidly (such as during a fire or natural disaster), and coordination is best done by one person. • Time is short and a decision must be made quickly. • Group members have personality, procedural, or social problems that make it difficult or impossible for them to work as a team on the solution.

problems, the output may be inferior, even though members may be bright and talented. We address how to apply small group theory—based as much as possible on scientific research—to make sure that groups work on the kinds of problems for which they are best suited, and to do so in ways likely to produce a high-quality solution (see Table 1.1).

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Individual or Group?

As president of your department's Advertising Club, you are getting ready to plan your events for the upcoming year when you learn that your department, facing a serious budget crunch, has cut your expected budget from $12,000 to $7,000 for the year—a loss of $5,000. The club's budget supports the annual Ad Club competition, sends the local winners to the national conference to compete for the top prize, funds a couple of local scholarships, and hosts a "shadow day" for area high school students to spend time on campus to discover what advertising students do. As Ad Club president responsible for the budget, you can decide how to make cuts yourself or you can appoint a task force to decide where to cut.

1. How would you weigh the factors (time, energy, expertise) in deciding how to make cuts?

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages if you make the cuts yourself? What are they if you appoint a committee to decide the cuts?

3. If you appoint a committee, members will spend a lot of time together thinking through the decisions that must be made. What benefits might they gain by working on such a time-consuming project?

Your experiences in groups may have been unpleasant ones. In fact, you may dread hearing a teacher tell you that you'll be working on a group project. Unfortunately, this kind of **grouphate** is common, probably because many groups do not function as well as they should. If this is how you feel about group participation, it is especially important for you to become familiar with group processes because you won't be able to avoid group participation but you *will* be expected to perform well.

Thus far, we have seen that small groups are commonly involved in problem solving. Before introducing you to the types of small groups that engage in problem solving and the situations that create them, we will first define key terms necessary to understand group communication. We encourage you to use our definitions when you think about, discuss, and complete small group assignments as you read this book.

Groups, Small Groups, Teams, and Small Group Communication

Defining the terms *group, team,* and *small group* is important initially before we discuss small group communication.

GROUPS

What is a group? While the answer may seem simple, scholars from disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, and communication have all tried to pinpoint the essential features of a group. Marvin Shaw, an important early small group theorist, defines

GLOSSARY

Grouphate

Hating or dreading participation in groups

a **group** as "persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by each other person."[27] Just putting a bunch of people in the same place does not mean that a group has been created; it takes time for members to develop their sense of being a unit working interdependently toward a common goal.

The following example will illustrate what we mean. At a recent communication conference, one of us stood waiting for a streetcar with three other conference attendees. We were only a collection of individuals and while we had the same individual purpose (to get back to our hotels) we just happened to be there at the same time, with no interaction, and no collective identity. As time passed, we began to talk to each and commented on the fact no streetcars had been seen. Now mutually aware of each other and our common problem, someone suggested we call Uber and share the ride to our different hotels. Mutual influence led to a common solution to our needs. While short in duration, we met the criteria for a small group: mutual influence, interdependence, common purpose, and shared identity.

SMALL GROUPS

Groups can range in size from very small (three) to very large. We define *small* not by numbers but in terms of psychological perception: A **small group** refers to a group in which individual members perceive each other and are aware of each other as individuals when they interact. This definition is precise only for a given point in time. A committee of five new members may be perceptually large until after each member has had a chance to speak repeatedly, but the initial Best Friends group of 20 seemed perceptually small because members had known each other well and had worked together on other projects over many years. At the point when they met to discuss buying Angel Canyon, members knew and could describe every other member and could also say something about what each person contributed to the discussion. We intentionally exclude the dyad (two people) because dyads function differently. They do not form networks or leadership hierarchies and if one member leaves, the dyad ceases to exist. In groups, however, members often leave, to be replaced by new members, and the group continues. Some of the original Best Friends members have left, but new members have joined and Best Friends endures.

More practically, small groups usually consist of three to seven with five being the most effective.[28] This seems to be the ideal range, so long as members possess sufficient knowledge and skills to do the job facing the group and have a diversity of perspectives and information relevant to the task. The more members, the more likely there will be communication overload for some members and isolation for others.

We focus on small groups in which the members meet regularly face-to-face or online to complete a task or tasks. These include work crews, task forces, sports teams, committees, classroom groups, one-meeting groups, and virtual groups whose members never meet face-to-face.

SMALL GROUPS VERSUS TEAMS

We use the terms *small group* and *team* interchangeably. We have participated in committees, task forces, small groups, and teams and have found that, regardless of what

GLOSSARY

Group

Three or more individuals who have a common purpose, interact with each other, influence each other, and are interdependent

Small Group

A group of at least three people that is small enough for individual members to perceive one another as individuals during interaction

something is called, there are clear differences between *effective* groups or teams and *ineffective* ones. Our focus is to help you understand these differences and use what you know to make your groups more effective.

However, you should know that some people think there *are* differences between groups and teams. For example, Steven Beebe and John Masterson believe that teams are more highly structured, with team member responsibilities more clearly spelled out, team rules more explicitly defined, and team goals more specific.[29] An example might be a sports team that spells out the responsibilities for each position and clarifies the goal (e.g., to win the division championship). Others reserve the concept of *team* for those groups that are especially effective.[30] We have found no relationship in real life between what a group may be called and how it actually performs. Some teams we have participated in have been disasters, but some committees have had all the hallmarks of effective teams. Thus, we do not differentiate between groups and teams and freely use both terms.

SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION

Our definitions of *group* and *small group* have emphasized the process of members communicating with each other to become interdependent. Communication among members is *the* essential feature of a group, regardless of the group's size or purpose. Thus, to understand small group dynamics, you must tackle the complexities of communication.[31]

Communication is the transactional process in which people simultaneously create, interpret, and negotiate shared meaning through their interaction. In small groups, the mutually negotiated meaning allows members to coordinate their activities. **Small group communication** means that group members simultaneously send and receive verbal and nonverbal messages—words, facial expressions, and so forth—to and from one another. During this process, they develop shared meanings and are able to coordinate their activities within the group. They pay attention to one another, interpret (or misinterpret) one another, negotiate what things mean, create interdependence, and accomplish something (their assigned task, we hope!). The communication itself creates the group and forges the interdependence necessary for individuals to call themselves a group.

GROUPS AND TECHNOLOGY

Today, most groups make use of technology in some way to make their work easier. Rather than talking about face-to-face groups *or* virtual groups, we consider the *degree* to which groups use technology to do their work and develop their relationships.[32] Some groups may meet only face-to-face, never using any form of technology; others, such as some online support groups or geographically distributed multinational groups, always meet virtually, never face-to-face. However, many groups do something in between: combine face-to-face meetings with technological tools to complete their work, such as reminder emails and texts between meetings.

Teleconferencing and applications such as Skype, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts allow members to meet at the same time although they may be widely scattered

GLOSSARY

Communication

The transactional process in which people simultaneously create, interpret, and negotiate shared meaning through their interaction

Small Group Communication

The verbal and nonverbal interaction among members of a small group

geographically. Email and group messaging applications such as GroupMe permit members to interact at different times and places that are convenient for each individual member—a real benefit when members live in different time zones or have varying work schedules. Still other applications allow members to work collaboratively on tasks whether they are in the same place or not. For instance, wikis and applications similar to Dropbox allow group members to work collaboratively on documents and to track changes made by each member. Thus, even if members live in the same city or work for the same organization, each may contribute to collaborative work from home or from their individual offices.

Gloria's work with her church's Art for Haiti committee illustrates how face-to-face groups work with technology. Tasked with planning an art exhibit and reception to benefit relief efforts for Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, committee members were recruited through email. They planned meetings using the Doodle application and used email to send out agendas. Member assignments were completed through technological tools. For instance, flyers were created and edited using Dropbox. The exhibit and reception was promoted exclusively through e-blasts, radio promotions, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts, and e-newsletters rather than traditional print means.

Communication that is mediated—via computers, telephones, and so forth—is thought to lack *social presence,* or the feeling that the communication is socially and emotionally similar to face-to-face communication.[33] For instance, because computers do not convey the full complement of nonverbal communication (e.g., tone of voice, facial expressions, body movements), the person on the receiving end may feel less connected to the person sending the computer message. In particular, because social presence is an issue in computer-mediated communication (CMC) some believe CMC may impair a group's ability to form strong relationships among members. However, research calls this view into question. Walther and his associates note that human beings adapt to whatever communication environment they face.[34] Thus, when members cannot use nonverbal communication naturally, as they can with face-to-face communication, they substitute verbal communication instead. These researchers found that virtual groups, using primarily verbal communication, formed bonds of attachment that were just as strong as face-to-face groups, although the process may take longer with CMC. We elaborate on these ideas in Chapter 3, when we explore the communication process in more detail.

We will address the impact of technology on small group dynamics throughout our text. Thus, we consider many computer-mediated groups in our definition.

Classifying Groups by Their Major Purpose

How a specific small group functions depends partly on why the group was formed in the first place. Groups form initially to address a number of human needs. We now discuss those needs and show the connection between those needs and how groups can be classified.

WHY PEOPLE JOIN GROUPS

Listening to people talk about why they join groups, you have no doubt heard that they like hanging out with a particular group of friends or that they like working with a group of colleagues. They like getting something done that could not be done working alone, such as crafting gun regulation in the aftermath of a national tragedy or securing student fee funding for a new recreation facility. People enjoy camaraderie, learning about themselves with others, and being a part of something larger than themselves. These reasons reflect psychologist Will Schutz's long recognized motivations for human interaction: our need for inclusion, openness (formerly affection), and control.[35] Inclusion is our need to belong and be acknowledged as a member of a group. Openness is our need to tell our story and have it heard and respected by others—without this, group work is not authentic. Control is our need to feel competent and able to see our talents and abilities used to make a difference. Small groups are often classified as primary or secondary, depending on which need is the major reason for their existence.

PRIMARY OR SECONDARY GROUPS

Meeting Member Needs and Handling Membership Changes

APPLY NOW

The membership of Best Friends has changed over the years. Some of the people who started the group have moved on to other things while new members have found their place at Best Friends. Membership changes can present unique challenges to a group.

1. Why might a member who was initially fully committed to a group's goals and willing to work hard on behalf of a group choose to leave the group?

2. Why might a new member choose to join?

3. What challenges does member fluctuation present for group members, existing and new?

4. What can current members do to make new members feel welcomed and part of the group?

Primary Groups.   **Primary groups** meet the first two types of needs, inclusion and openness. They may accomplish work, but that is not their primary objective. Loving, caring, avoiding feelings of loneliness, sharing, feeling cared about—these are the motives for which we willingly give up some freedom as individuals to be members of primary groups. We are all familiar with families, friendship groups, sororities and fraternities, drinking buddies, cliques, gangs, and those many small groups that seem to form spontaneously to meet interpersonal needs for inclusion and openness. The communication patterns you learned in your first group—your family—likely affect the way you communicate in groups now.[36]

FIGURE 1.1   Groups with Both Primary and Secondary Characteristics

Purely primary   **Purely secondary**

Family   Poker club   Therapy   Learning   Task
                    Ski club   group   group   force
        Close   AA support   Class project   Committee   Production
        friends   group   group   at work   group
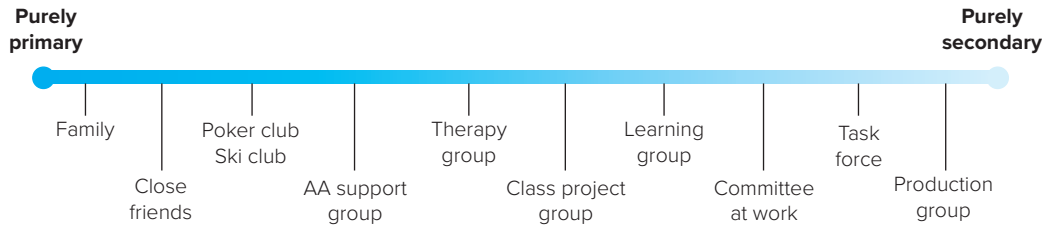
Secondary Groups.   **Secondary groups**, or task groups, exist mainly to meet control needs: solving all sorts of problems. Control, in this sense, may include supplying physical needs, such as providing water, food, and shelter to victims of Houston's flooding, preventing the spread of cholera in Haiti, combating global warming, or even more mundane matters such as fixing a flat tire or creating a budget for a struggling animal shelter. This book is mostly about secondary groups.

No group is purely primary or secondary in its functioning (see Figure 1.1). Primary groups encounter and solve problems. Secondary groups supply members with a sense of inclusion. In fact, research is clear in its findings that work on a task must be complemented with effective social skills so that members feel included, appreciated, and even loved.[37] Our motives for joining groups are often mixed; we may want to participate in solving a problem, but experiencing pleasure in the interaction with others is also a main reason for our involvement.[38]

TYPES OF SECONDARY GROUPS

Secondary groups may be formed to complete one specific job or a variety of related tasks. Examples include support groups, learning groups, organizational groups (such as committees, work teams, self-managed work teams, and quality control circles), and activity groups.

Support Groups.   **Support groups**, or therapy or personal growth groups, exist to help members understand and address personal issues or problems. Regardless of what they are called, their purpose is not to solve a problem *as a group* but to help individual members address personal issues in order to cope better with those problems. Groups based on the well-known 12-step process developed by Alcoholics Anonymous are examples of support groups, as are groups such as breast cancer support groups, anger management groups for abusive spouses, and so forth. A clinical psychologist recently started a grief support group for members of her church who were struggling with the 2016 mass shooting in Orlando, Florida. The premise of these groups is that individuals can better understand and cope with their own problems if they interact with others with similar problems.

The easy availability of computers has made it possible for people to form support groups of members who never meet face-to-face, yet who experience strong support

and comfort from their computer contacts. In a study comparing online and face-to-face support groups, Kevin Wright found that people benefited from both types.[39] Online groups have the advantages of providing 24-hour access, greater participant diversity of experience and information, and freedom to discuss risky topics. The online support networks also tended to be larger, thereby providing members with more resources. Interestingly, the online support groups did not evolve into face-to-face groups.

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GLOSSARY

Learning Groups

Secondary groups whose members meet to understand and learn about a particular topic

Learning Groups.   **Learning groups** of many sorts, as we mentioned earlier, exist to help members understand or control events in their lives. Your class is a learning group (probably a large one) that may be further organized into several small learning groups. Study groups are types of learning groups. Many universities group students into cohorts, whose members enter a particular program together and stay together throughout their course of study. Cohorts are encouraged to study together and to help each other learn, much like the group of young doctors in *Grey's Anatomy.* In a study of adult undergraduate learning cohorts, researchers found a significant relationship between the level of group development and the individual achievement, measured by grade point average, of the members.[40] Not all groups achieved equally, which further emphasizes the importance of understanding group communication and development.

Organizational Groups.   Organizations such as corporations, schools, agencies, legislatures, bureaus, large departments, hospitals, and even social clubs create problem-solving groups to serve them. **Organizational groups** include any such problem-solving group formed within the context of a larger organization.

Committees.   Most **committees** are created by larger organizations to perform a service for the organization. The organization commits a problem or task to the small group (committee) created for that purpose. For example, at Kathy's university, a fact-finding committee was asked to investigate the possibility of establishing an honor code and report its findings to the faculty and president. Occasionally, a special committee is empowered both to select a plan and to execute it, though in most cases problem-solving committees do not go beyond making recommendations. Instead, they are usually advisory, reporting to an executive or a board that has final authority and responsibility for deciding. A different committee is created to carry out the chosen plan, or an individual may be assigned to execute the solution. Committees in organizations may be standing or ad hoc.

A *standing committee* is a permanent committee. Often, an organization's bylaws include a procedure for creating it and a description of its purpose and area of freedom to act. For example, a membership committee may be responsible for recruiting new members and for screening the applicants' qualifications. Even though a standing committee continues indefinitely, its membership is usually changed regularly by election or appointment.

Ad hoc committees are created to perform one special assignment and then dissolve. The end product might be a report of findings or recommended solutions—for example, evaluations of several sites for a new plant or suggestions about how to cut costs. This report is often delivered in writing and orally to whoever created the special committee. At Gloria's university, a task force was appointed to study massive open online courses (MOOCs) and recommend the extent of her university's participation in MOOCs. Its work thus completed, the committee disbanded.

Such groups are often called *task forces,* with members selected because their knowledge and skills are thought necessary to do the group's work. Presidents have created many task forces to investigate and make recommendations on such national concerns as illegal immigration, opiate addiction, income inequality, health care, and what contributes to sexual and domestic violence against women.

Self-Managed Work Teams.   Sometimes called autonomous work groups or modules, **self-managed work teams** are groups of peers who manage their own work schedules and procedures within certain prescribed limits. Members are highly trained and cross-trained—each is able to perform several tasks for the team. The process is similar to having a team of people building a house: "When you need more carpenters, the painters can put down their brushes and pick up hammers for a couple of hours. Or the carpenter goes and helps the plumber when he's behind."[41] These kinds of teams, used by Gore, Semco, and Proctor & Gamble, are excellent examples of how successful groups can be when members have the means to make and carry out their own decisions.[42]

A self-managed work team elects its own leader, who is a co-worker, not a supervisor or manager. The leader acts as a coordinator, not a boss. The organization establishes

GLOSSARY

Organizational Groups

Groups created by organizations, usually to solve organizational problems

Committee

A type of secondary group that performs a specific service for an organization

Self-Managed Work Teams

Also called autonomous work groups; groups of peers who manage their own work schedules and procedures

What's in a Name?

The SC Johnson Company has a meeting-intensive culture that has spawned its own vocabulary to describe various kinds of meetings. *Generals* are weekly one-on-one meetings that bosses hold with their subordinates. *Nice-to-knows* are optional informational meetings that employees often skip, and *huddles* are meetings designed to provide quick updates.

1. What kinds of group meetings do you attend?
2. What nicknames would you give to them?

the work group's area of freedom, but often these groups have a great deal of latitude in how they operate. Some work groups establish their own schedules and annual budgets, prepare their own reports, develop specifications for jobs and procedures, solve technical problems that occur while completing jobs, and even prepare bids in attempting to attract new company business. For example, at one office furniture manufacturer, the custom-orders team has complete authority to bid jobs under $10,000, custom-design the furniture for the client, and schedule its manufacture. For complex jobs, the whole team goes to the client's office to listen and offer suggestions. The team's success has made the custom-order portion of the business extremely profitable.[43]

Being an Ethical Group Member

Throughout this chapter we have emphasized how important it is for you to understand small groups so you can be a valuable participant in them. You want to be the kind of group member others can count on, thus making the small group experience a satisfying and successful one for all members. In most small group communication classes, we have found one or two project groups plagued by slackers who want credit for the work but are unwilling to do their share of the work. Such individuals are the biggest source of animosity among group members and are responsible for derailing many projects. Other problem members include bullies, know-it-alls, and individuals who are just plain insensitive to the needs of others. A slightly different kind of problem member is the **lone wolf**, who may well be committed to the group's goals, but who hurts the group because he prefers to work alone and thus sees others as less capable and effective.[44]

Ideally, everyone in a group wants to be a member others can count on. Members need to know what is expected of responsible, ethical members. **Ethics** are the "rules or standards for right conduct or practice,"[45] or what is considered appropriate behavior in certain contexts. Our professional association, the National Communication Association, has developed a credo that describes guidelines for ethical communication in all contexts (see Figure 1.2). We have used this credo as the basis for developing principles of ethical communication in small groups. In a small group, ethical behavior concerns members' willingness to communicate, treatment of fellow members, treatment of information, and commitment to the group.

FIGURE 1.2   National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore we, the members of the National Communication Association, endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication:

We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.

We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.

We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.

We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.

We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.

We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.

We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.

We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.

We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

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1. **Members must be willing to communicate and share ideas, information, and perspectives within the group.**
    Groups succeed because several heads are better than one. However, this advantage will not be realized if group members are unwilling to speak up or engage in group dialogue. Being silent deprives the group of your voice. Even if you are shy about

talking, there are other ways to contribute, such as encouraging other members, being attentive during discussion, and volunteering for work that needs to be done outside of meetings.

2. **Group members should treat their fellow members with respect and consideration.**

   If members are to respect each other, they must operate from the belief that all group members have the same rights. Egalitarian attitudes encourage all members to contribute fully to the task at hand and value good ideas no matter who contributes them. To do otherwise undermines the potential effectiveness of the group. If members fear being bullied or belittled, they will think twice about venturing an idea or opinion. Google put all its resources together in its Project "Aristotle" to figure out the secrets of the perfect team. After wading through tons of data and research, the answer came down to one simple question: How do group members treat each other? Members who listen to each other and notice and respect each other's feelings and needs create the most effective teams. Members should not feel embarrassed, rejected, or punished for taking risks in the group.[46]

3. **Group members should use their best critical thinking skills when they evaluate information, ideas, and proposals in a group.**

   Members should evaluate information in a thorough and unbiased way. Earlier, we noted that an advantage to group processes is that members can correct each other's misinformation and faulty reasoning. In fact, it is unethical for them *not* to do so, because decisions are only as good as the information and reasoning on which they are based. Perhaps the lives of the 1986 *Columbia* space shuttle crew could have been saved had NASA officials paid attention to safety warnings more thoroughly and with less bias. Tragically, important information about the structural integrity of the shuttle was ignored. Group members must make a conscientious effort to find and present all relevant information and points of view, must not falsify data or information, and must evaluate all the information in an objective manner.

4. **Members must demonstrate a commitment to the group.**

   Some people simply are unable or unwilling to commit to a group, and they make horrible group members. For as long as they are in the group, members should place the good of the group ahead of their own individual goals. Committed, responsible members are highly involved in the activity of the group. They exhibit four characteristics: effort, initiative, responsibility, and backing-up behaviors, in which they not only do their share of the work but also help the other members with *their* tasks.[47] All members are needed, and there is no room for freeloaders or lone wolves. Moreover, a committed member supports the group's actions and decisions, even if the decision is not what the member would have chosen. If you cannot do these things, it may be better for you to leave the group.

Group member communication matters because it affects other members as well as the group. Whenever you are faced with choosing how to behave in your small group, following these four principles should help you. Stand back and consider the impact of your communication on others and the group because membership in groups is not only about participation but also about observation. We turn now to the value of a participant-observer perspective.

The Participant-Observer Perspective

Earlier, we asked you to consider all the groups to which you belong. You will continue to be a member of these groups even as you learn about small group communication from this text. This means that you will be in the role of a **participant-observer**, someone who is a regular member of the group *and,* at the same time, actively observes the group and adapts to its processes and procedures. This role is especially important for the group leader or leaders. Because most group members have not been trained to be effective group participants, it is especially important for you to monitor your groups' discussions and help your groups perform as well as possible. As a skilled participant-observer, you can help a group by supplying information, procedural suggestions, and interpersonal communication skills it needs. This is an important focus of our text—to help you become a more valuable group member as you sharpen your skills in observing small group processes.

We encourage you to become a participant-observer for the groups you are in. As you read our text, try to think of examples from your own group experiences that illustrate the principles described in the text. Start paying attention in a conscious way to the processes of small group communication. In addition, use the case study and application boxes in each chapter to improve your awareness of group dynamics. As you learn more about communicating effectively in groups, you will feel more comfortable making suggestions to serve the groups to which you belong. We provide additional information about the participant-observer and other types of observers in the Appendix.

GLOSSARY

Participant-Observer (Perspective)

A group member who participates but also observes the group and adapts as necessary

Would You Falsify Data?

ETHICAL DILEMMA

Your five-member class project group has been assigned to serve as consultants to another group. You are charged with observing this group, gathering data about it, evaluating the group's communication, and making recommendations to improve the group's functioning. The problem is that each of your project group members is very busy, and you're having a hard time agreeing on a time to observe the other group. Two of you are graduating at the end of the semester, and one of you, planning to spend the summer working in Europe, is scrambling to get all assignments finished in time to leave. Two members suggest making up data for your final project. The chances of getting caught are slim, and this "solution" would save you all several hours of observation and work. You personally strongly object to this form of cheating. For one thing, you don't want to chance having a plagiarism charge against you. But mainly you object to this form of lying, and you don't want to damage your relationship with your professor.

1. Do you speak or remain silent?
2. If you speak, what do you say?
3. What do you do if the entire group—except you—is in favor of falsifying data?
4. Do you talk to the teacher? Why or why not?

RESOURCES FOR REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY

- People in modern society need to be able to function effectively in small groups if they want to succeed and if they want to be full participants in contemporary organizational life.

- Small group members participating in decision making create and consider more issues, correct each other's misinformation, accept solutions more often, and are more loyal to the organization than members who don't participate in decisions.

- Perceptual awareness makes a group "small"; the group must be small enough for each member to participate and for each member to be conscious of and aware of the other members.

- Contemporary groups often mediate their small group communication through computers as well as use a variety of technological tools to enhance their performance.

- Groups can be classified according to their purpose. Groups can satisfy inclusion, a openness, and control needs.

- Ethical group members are willing to communicate, treat others with respect, evaluate information thoroughly, and demonstrate commitment to the group.

- Participant-observers, members who know something about the small group process, can help a group succeed.

EXERCISES

1. List all the groups to which you belong. Be sure to include family groups, friendship and other social groups, activity groups, committees, work teams, athletic teams, classroom groups, study groups, political action groups, and interest groups. Categorize them into primary or secondary groups (recognizing that no group is solely one or the other). Discuss your list with the class or in small groups.

2. Ask individuals how they have used technology (email, Facebook, wikis, Twitter, and so forth) as supplements to face-to-face meetings.

In what ways do these technologies help or impede group performance?

3. Break up into small groups. Devise your own list of ethical standards for group members. You can do this for a general class discussion, or you can develop a class list of standards that will be used for all future group work in the class. If the class is structured around a major group project, then individual groups can create their lists relevant to the standards of the group members.

KEY TERMS • CONCEPTS

Committee

Communication

Ethics

Group

Grouphate

Learning Groups

Lone Wolf

Organizational Groups

Participant-Observer
(Perspective)

Primary Groups

Secondary Groups

Self-Managed Work
Teams

Small Group

Small Group Communication

Support Groups

NOTES

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2

Groups as Open Systems

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

1. Explain what a theory is and why systems theory is useful for studying small group communication.

2. Define and give examples of a system.

3. Define inputs, throughput processes, and outputs of a group system.

4. Explain why communication is the heart of a group's throughput process.

5. Describe the role of the group's environment.

6. Compare and contrast open and closed systems.

7. Describe what interdependence means for how a small group system functions.

8. Explain the role of feedback in helping a system adapt to changing circumstances.

9. Explain why all groups experience multiple causes and multiple paths.

10. Describe synergy and explain why sometimes groups exhibit positive or negative synergy.

The 1988 Jamaican Winter Olympic Bobsled Team

A Jamaican Olympic bobsled team is about as unlikely as a Popsicle stand in the middle of the Mohave Desert—but that is the true story told in the film *Cool Runnings!* Now a part of popular culture, it has inspired the reggae song, "Jamaican Bobsled," it was even mentioned in the popular television show *Futurama,* and their two-person bobsled team was a smash hit in the 2014 Sochi Olympics. In the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, with only 3 months to find equipment, secure financial backing, and qualify, four of the most incompatible, untrained Jamaicans come together to compete for an Olympic gold medal. Sanka is the best pushcart driver in all Jamaica; his friend Derice is Jamaica's beloved track sprinter; Yul is a moody, angry sprinter; and Junior is a wealthy sprinter who tripped both Derice and Yul in the Olympic track qualifiers. Junior's mistake cost Derice his chance to follow his dad's legacy and compete for Olympic gold in track. Not to be denied, Derice searches for another way to try for a medal. He hears about Irving Blitzer, a disgraced Olympic bobsled medalist stripped of his medals for cheating, but who believed track sprinters would make outstanding bobsledders. Derice pleads with Irv to coach the first Jamaican bobsled team. Sanka signs on as a favor for his friend, Yul joins to get off the island, and Junior joins to get away from his domineering father.

This unlikely collection of three track sprinters, one pushcart driver, and a disgraced coach has no money, no sled, no ice and snow to practice on, no fan support, skeptical and cruel responses from fellow bobsledders, and animosity among team members. Any betting person would predict from these initial factors that they would fail. Even the Jamaican Olympic committee would not give them the money to go to Canada for the bobsled trials. Overcoming one obstacle after another, these athletes slowly emerge as a cohesive Olympic team. During the last run for gold, this team crashes before the finish line because of a loose runner on the sled. Injured but not deterred, they pick up their sled, named "Cool Runnings," and walk over the finish line to the cheers of the other bobsledders and all of Jamaica. What does "Cool Runnings" mean? It translates into "peace be the journey."[1]

The story of *Cool Runnings* illustrates several important aspects of systems theory. We will return to the story throughout the chapter to provide examples of how various elements of systems theory apply to the Jamaican bobsled team. First, we consider what a theory is, examine an overview of general systems theory, and look at how it furnishes a useful and popular framework for examining small group communication.

What Is a Theory?

Many people believe theories are boring, irrelevant, and unnecessary. However, the truth is that all of us use theories every day, although we probably do not think about it. A **theory** is a "map of reality,"[2] something that helps us navigate unfamiliar terrain and make decisions. Like a map, a theory describes relationships between elements (e.g., Kansas City is 180 miles northwest of Springfield) and shows you how to get from one element to another (from Springfield, take Route 13 to Clinton, Route 7 to Harrison, and I-49 to Kansas City). This helps make a drive from Springfield to Kansas City predictable and orderly.

Good theories are practical and reliable ways to help improve your decision making. For example, assume you've agreed to meet your friends for a "Thank God It's Friday" celebration, but you will first have to cash Friday's paycheck. If you wait until 5:00 P.M. on Friday, you'll be stuck in a long line at the bank's drive-through along with everybody else who got paid on Friday! So you ask your boss if you can leave at 4:00 P.M. to beat the rush. Your theory probably goes something like this: (1) Most people get paid on Friday; (2) payday produces long lines at the bank; (3) most businesses close at 4:30 or 5:00 P.M.; (4) therefore, if I wait until 5:00 P.M. on Friday, I'll be stuck in a long line. Solution: Leave at 4:00 and beat the crowd. You have just theorized about the relationship between the day of the week and the time, and you've figured out a solution using your own implicit theory to help you.

There are many theories that have a bearing on small group communication. Some broad theories apply to all or most groups; others are more limited, applying in particular group situations (e.g., building good group environments) or to a few clearly defined phenomena (e.g., conflict). We will discuss a number of theories throughout this book, which will be useful in helping you assess what is and isn't working and why, and what you might do about it. The theory we turn to now, general systems theory, is a comprehensive theory that applies to all living organisms, including social systems such as groups. We use this theory as a broad framework for organizing the many elements that constitute a small group.

Overview of General Systems Theory

General systems theory was developed by a biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, as a way to examine and explain complex living organisms. Because living organisms, including groups, are constantly changing, they are difficult to study. Think for a moment about your own body, one of the most complex of all organisms. Although it appears

to operate as a single unit, in reality it is composed of many smaller units that work interdependently to sustain your life. For example, when you walk across the room, your muscular, skeletal, nervous, circulatory, and respiratory systems all cooperate in moving you to your destination. Even if you are sitting still, your body is involved in constant activity—your eyelids are blinking, your heart is beating, you are breathing automatically, and so forth. Your individual cells constantly change as they take in nourishment through the blood, restore themselves, and excrete waste through the cell walls. Systems theory provides us with a way of examining and describing how a system's parts are interrelated, even while they are continuously changing. Systems theory reminds us that when we want to understand any living entity—such as a group— we not only study its parts but also how the parts operate together to understand the organism as a *whole.*

Many individual elements affect the dynamics of a group—the reason the group was formed, the personalities of group members, the information members have, the type of leadership, the way the group handles conflict, and how successful the group has been in accomplishing previous tasks, to name only a few. *But no single element functions alone;* the elements interact continuously. Systems theory concepts warn us not to oversimplify our description of group interaction. All parts interact to produce the entity called a "small group."

Characterizing a group as a social system was a significant advance in small group communication theory. The assumption that *communication* connects the relevant parts of a system is fundamental to understanding a small group as a system. This assumption

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System

A set of elements that functions as a whole because of interdependent relationships

The Small Group as a System

Several concepts are important to understanding a small group as a system. We will use the Jamaican bobsled case study we presented at the beginning of the chapter to illustrate these concepts.

DEFINITION OF A SYSTEM

A **system** is composed of parts that are interdependent with each other, connected in such a manner that any change in one part ripples through the entire system. Group member interdependence, introduced in Chapter 1, is the mutual influence between members that creates a "group" from a collection of individuals; a group is interdependent as well with the environment it belongs to.

Think back to the Jamaican bobsled team (see also Figure 2.1). Several elements and their unique interaction affected the team. Consider first the members themselves, with their various abilities. A winning bobsled team needs a driver and three strong runners to push the sled—and this team had them. Sanka was loyal to Derice and was, after all, the best pushcart driver in all of Jamaica. Yul was strong and fast. Junior was also quick and sharp. And Derice was born to compete in the Olympics—both fast and driven.

A second element was the team's game plan. For example, how should the coach match these abilities with the various positions? Should the pushcart driver be the driver of the sled? The team's first conflict involved this very issue. Sanka thought he should be the driver, yet the coach pointed out that the driver had to be focused at all times and was responsible not only for the course but also for the lives of the others. So Derice was selected as the driver, and Sanka became the brakeman. The other two were the middlemen.

The third element was the leadership within the team. Derice, for instance, had to figure out how to manage the hard feelings between Yul and Junior. In addition, Yul had a personal motive, a *hidden agenda,* that had nothing to do with the team—he wanted to use the "team" to get off the island.

The fourth element was Irv's ability to assess the team's competency, earn members' trust, and motivate them to find their own style of sledding. Notice also the interaction of the team with its surroundings. The attitudes of the Jamaicans, their families, other Olympic bobsledders and coaches, as well as the media, at first thwarted then later inspired the team. In return, the team's success influenced the entire country of Jamaica and the rest of the winter Olympic community.

CONCEPTS VITAL TO UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS

To understand systems theory, you need to understand four basic concepts true of all systems: inputs, throughput processes, outputs, and environment. Our explanations of these are based on scholarly work by Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn.[3]

FIGURE 2.1   Bobsled Team as a Small Group System

Environment

Competing teams

Jamaican
fans

Coach

Recruiters
International
Alliance on
Winter Sports

Equipment

Brakeman

**1st
Middleman**

Uniforms

Team leadership,
Strategy

**2nd
Middleman**

Driver

Skills

Attitudes

Physical characteristics
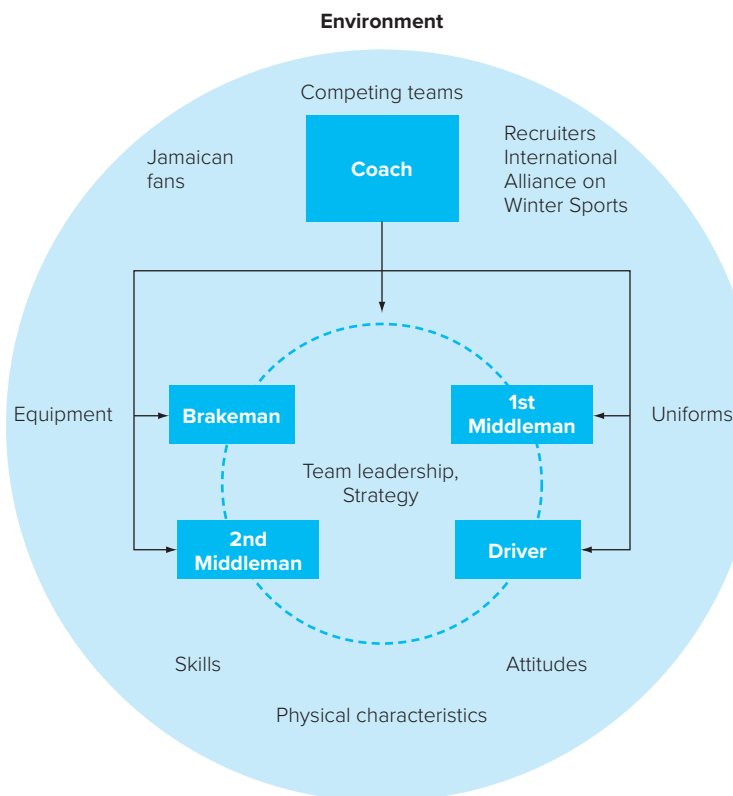
Inputs.   The "raw materials" that are initially brought to the group from the outside, such as people, information, energies, and resources designed to help group problem solving, are a group's **inputs** (see Table 2.1). For example, the abilities of the bobsled players—whether they were competent or not, whether they were relatively fast or slow, how well they "read" the subtle nature of the course—were all inputs that the players brought with them to the group and that influenced how well the team performed during a run. Other inputs included the instructions on how to synchronize the movements of all four bobsledders and their sled, the continuous stream of information that Irv gathered about the strengths and weaknesses of opposing teams, the three-month time limit they had to qualify, and the attitudes of the team members toward each other, the sport, and their coach.

Members' personality characteristics are important and influential group input factors.[4] A useful framework for understanding personality is the Five Factor Model developed by psychologists over the last two decades.[5] In a number of studies, all five factors

GLOSSARY

Inputs

All the elements of a system that are present at the outset, or the initial raw materials of the system

TABLE 2.1	**Examples of Small Group Inputs**	
Members	**Resources**	**Environmental Factors**
Personalities and characteristics (e.g., age, gender)	Information about task	Physical surroundings
	Knowledge and expertise	Degree of support from parent group or organization
Needs	Time available for group work	
Attitudes	Tangible resources (e.g., money, materials)	
Values	Computer software	
Abilities and skills		

in this model—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and emotional stability (or neuroticism)—have been found to be related to members' behavior in small groups.[6] In addition, input factors such as members' information and experience, physical or social factors in the environment (such as room noise), and how the group's specific instructions are framed affect members' interactions and ultimate outcomes.

Throughput Processes.   Inputs are transformed into group outputs through the activities the group engages in while going about its task. These **throughput processes** (see Table 2.2) include the group's rules, how its leadership develops, how conflict is managed by everyone, and the roles that are created and enacted by members. Communication is *the* central activity in this transformative process. Through communication a group receives information (an input), then discusses that information, argues about its credibility and what it means to the group, and finally decides to incorporate it into the final report.

The coach's placement of Derice as the bobsled driver instead of Sanka, the obvious choice, is an example of a throughput process. The informal leadership of Sanka, whose enthusiasm motivated the other members, was also part of the team's throughput processes. Significant for this team was how Yul and Junior developed a mutual respect across socioeconomic lines.

In another example, Steve Winton and Tom Kane found that different instructions to a group produced different results.[7] When groups were told to pay attention to how well group members were interacting with one another, they engaged in more strategic activity and ended up being more satisfied with their performance, compared with groups that were told to focus on how well they were performing regarding the goal. Clearly, input affects throughput processes and ultimately outputs.

Recall from Chapter 1 that all four ethical principles for group members are anchored in the National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical

GLOSSARY

Throughput Processes

Influences on the system that result from actual activities within the group as it goes about its business

TABLE 2.2	**Examples of Small Group Throughput Processes**

MEMBERS' BEHAVIORS
Extent to which members encourage ideas

Extent that members show a willingness to work

Extent to which members are open minded

Extent to which members are fair and equitable in dealing with disagreements

Extent to which members show a sense of belonging to a unique group

GROUP NORMS
Support for using critical thinking skills to test ideas versus uncritical acceptance of ideas

Support for open disagreement versus suppression of conflict

Support for relative equality among members versus strict hierarchy

COMMUNICATION NETWORKS
Extent to which each member talks to every other member

Extent to which participation is distributed evenly

STATUS RELATIONSHIPS
Extent that leadership matches group needs

Extent to which power and influence are shared

Extent to which group roles complement each other and contribute to the group purpose

PROCEDURES
Communication

Decision making and problem solving

Method for implementing solutions

Communication and, in effect, describe general effective throughput processes or ways to transform initial inputs into outputs everyone can be proud of. Whether you are showing a willingness to communicate, displaying respect for others, paying careful attention to group processes, or demonstrating commitment to your group, you are engaging in a variety of *communicative* behaviors—all four standards are grounded in *what* and *how* you communicate to others. Group communication is the focus of Chapters 3 and 4.

TABLE 2.3	Examples of Small Group Outputs

Tangible Outcomes	Intangible Outcomes
Reports	Feelings among members (cohesiveness, trust; disharmony, dislike)
Recommendations	
Solutions and decisions	Personal growth of members
Physical objects (e.g., table decorations, assembled cars)	Personal satisfaction of members
	Modifications in throughput procedures (e.g., alterations in the status relationships, use of different conflict resolution strategies)

Outputs.   **Outputs** are the continual "results" of the group's throughput processes (see Table 2.3), including tangible outcomes, such as decisions the group has made, written reports it has completed, or Olympic races it has won. However, they also include less obvious results, such as cohesiveness, member satisfaction, personal growth of individual members, and changes in the group's structure. In our bobsled example, a clear result of the members' respect for each other was, although not a gold medal, pride in themselves and adulation from their country. Other outputs included the sledders' increased cohesiveness and new skills, Junior's independence from his father, Yul's pride in the team, and Derice's realization that a gold medal does not make one a whole person.

Although we hope that the outputs of a small group's interaction are positive and helpful, some outputs are toxic waste to both the group itself and its parent organization. Hasty decisions, dissatisfaction of group members, and shoddy products are examples of this waste, dangerous to the group as well as the organization to which it belongs.

These three elements are themselves interdependent and changing all the time. Outputs thus reenter the group system as inputs affecting throughput processes and influencing new outputs. This ripple effect can be seen when a group member enters the group unwilling to communicate to other members; this input affects the overall group communication by creating a climate of suspicion (throughput), which leads to low group satisfaction among other members (output). The members' subsequent lack of commitment to each other becomes a new input element, which continues to destroy the group's climate (throughput), leading to a group report that is never finished (output). This downward pattern will continue unless group members notice the problems and adjust their communication to change the climate of the group. We will take up the issue of group feedback after we discuss the relationship a small group has with its environment.

Environment.   A group does not exist apart from its surroundings, or **environment**, much of which potentially affects the group. Groups are not like lead boxes that keep

things from getting in or out. The "walls" between a group and its environment are porous, allowing information in and out as well as providing the opportunity for mutual influence between the group and its environment. In our example, the Jamaican fans and the other bobsledders influenced the team's morale and enthusiasm. Notice that the team affected its environment as well. When the other bobsledders discovered the courage of this Jamaican team, their disrespect turned into support, and those who had rejected the coach for his past cheating accepted him back into the bobsled fraternity.

Your classroom group's immediate environment is the classroom. Your group is affected by whether the classroom is pleasant or ugly, noisy or quiet. In addition, what your friends in other classes say or do may cause your group to change a procedure, a topic, an approach, and so forth. These friends and their classes are part of your group's environment, too.

The effect of a group's environment, or its context, is an important factor in how well a group operates.[8] To understand a small group in depth, we must consider the influence of the group's environment. Linda Putnam and Cynthia Stohl, two leading scholars of group communication, call this a **bona fide group perspective**.[9] They emphasize that real-world groups both *shape* and are *shaped by* those same environments. This interdependence occurs for several reasons. First, members of groups often belong to other groups that simultaneously influence and are influenced by them. Second, groups typically have to coordinate their actions with other groups within the same parent organization or across organizations. Third, there is frequent communication within the group as well as between the group and other larger groups over interpretation of group goals, the extent of the group's authority, and support for group actions that helps define a group's accountability for its task. Finally, members bring to their groups a variety of interests, ways of speaking, and mental models of effective group problem solving. This in turn affects how members create their sense of "group."

Consider, for instance, a student group that had decided to investigate traffic safety when a student was killed crossing a street on her way to class. Although group members had not known the victim, they wanted her death to result in positive actions to make the campus safer. The student's death—part of the group's environment—was the catalyst for motivating the group to act. The street where the student died, bordering the east side of the campus, was controlled by the city; the students did not have the authority to decide, on their own, what safety measures should be taken, but they could recommend various options. The group's written report and recommendations were summarized in an oral report given to on-campus groups that included staff from the offices of Student Affairs, Administrative Services, and the president. In addition, several off-campus groups, including the city offices of Planning and Development, Traffic Engineering, and Street Maintenance, heard the group's presentation and received the written report. These groups—also part of the student group's environment—had to be persuaded to adopt the group's recommendations before any changes could be implemented. To produce a compelling report, the group had to research local and state laws about changing street configurations and present their information professionally, in the format preferred by these various groups. The city ultimately accepted the students' recommendations to build a retaining wall down the