

## Characteristics of Communication

Just as we learn to walk, so do we learn to communicate. Because communication is learned, we can always improve our ability to communicate. Several communication characteristics provide a foundation for practicing and improving our communication skills.

### Communication Has Purpose

Whenever we communicate, we have a purpose for doing so. The purpose may be serious or trivial, and we may or may not be aware of it at the time. Here we list five basic purposes we'll be addressing throughout the book.

1. **We communicate to develop and maintain our sense of self.** Through our interactions, we learn who we are and what we are good at.
2. **We communicate to meet our social needs.** Just as we need food, water, and shelter, so too do we need contact with other people. Two people may converse happily for hours about inconsequential matters that neither one remembers later. Still, their communication functions to meet this important human need.
3. **We communicate to develop and maintain relationships.** For example, when Beth calls Leah to ask whether she'd like to join her for lunch to discuss a class project, her purpose actually may be to resolve a recent misunderstanding, because she wants to maintain a positive relationship with Leah.
4. **We communicate to exchange information.** Whether trying to decide how warmly to dress or whom to vote for in the next election, we all communicate to exchange information. We do so through observation, reading, and direct communication with others both face-to-face and virtually.
5. **We communicate to influence others.** We may communicate to try to convince friends to go to a particular restaurant or to see a certain movie, a supervisor to alter the work schedule, or an instructor to change a grade.

### Communication Is Continuous

We are always sending and interpreting messages. Even silence communicates if another person infers meaning from it. Why? Because our nonverbal behavior represents reactions to our environment and to the people around us. If we are cold, we might shiver; if we are hot or nervous, we might perspire; if we are bored, happy, or confused, our nonverbal language will probably show it.

### Communication Is Irreversible

Once an exchange takes place, we can never go back in time and erase the communication. We might be able to repair damage we have done, but the message has been communicated. When you participate in an online discussion or leave a post on a blog, you are leaving an electronic "footprint" that others can follow and read. E-mails, IMs, and text messages are not always completely private either. Once you push the "send" button, not only can't you take it back, but you have little control over who the receiver might forward it to or how it might be used publicly. That's why Sarah decided not to post a picture of herself with her friends at the local pub on her Facebook page.

Even though she could limit which of her “friends” could see it, she also knew that any of them could also then share it with others, as well. She didn’t want a photo like this to hurt her professional image.

### Communication Is Situated

Communication occurs within a specific setting that affects how the messages are produced, interpreted, and coordinated (Burlinson, 2009). Do you swear when you talk? For most of us the answer to that is “it depends.” While we may occasionally use curse words when we are with friends or peers, many of us wouldn’t consider swearing in front of our supervisors, teachers, grandmothers, or religious leaders. Similarly, the interpretation of the statement “I love you” varies depending on the setting. During a candlelit anniversary dinner, it may be interpreted as a statement of romantic feelings. If a mother says it as she greets her daughter, it may be interpreted as motherly love. If it is made in response to a joke delivered by someone in a group of friends gathered to watch a football game, it may be interpreted as a complement for being clever.



**Photo 1.6** How might you signal trust and intimacy during a conversation?

### Communication Is Indexical

How we communicate is also an **index** or measure of the emotional temperature of our relationship at the time. For instance, when they are getting in the car to leave for a holiday, Laura says to Darryl, “I remembered to bring the map.” She is not just reporting information. Through her tone of voice and other nonverbal cues, she is also communicating something about the relationship, such as, “You can always depend on me,” or “You never remember to think of these things.” More specifically, communication may signal the level of trust; who has control; and the degree of intimacy in a relationship (Miller & Rogers, 1987).

**Trust** is the extent to which partners believe they can rely on, depend on, and have faith in their partners (Photo 1.6). For instance, Mark says, “I’ll do the final edits and turn in the paper.” Sandy replies, “Never mind, I’ll do it so that it won’t be late,” which may signal that she doesn’t trust Mark to get the group’s paper in on time.

**Control** is the extent to which partners believe themselves to be “in charge” in the relationship. When Tom says to Sue, “I know you’re concerned about the budget, but I’ll see to it that we have enough money to cover everything,” through his words, tone of voice, and nonverbal behavior, he is signaling that he is “in charge” of the finances. In turn, Sue may respond by either verbally responding or nonverbally showing she agrees with him or by challenging him and asserting her desire to control the budget. In other words, control is communicated with either complementary or symmetrical feedback.

**Complementary feedback** signals agreement about who is in control, whereas **symmetrical feedback** signals disagreement. If Sue says, “Great, I’m glad you’re looking after it,” her feedback complements his message. But if Sue responds, “Wait a minute, you’re

**index**  
measure of the emotional temperature of our relationship at the time

**trust**  
the extent to which partners have faith that their partners will not intentionally do anything to harm them

**control**  
the degree to which one participant is perceived to be more dominant or powerful

**complementary feedback**  
a message that signals agreement about who is in control

**symmetrical feedback**  
a message that signals disagreement about who is in control



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**intimacy**  
the degree of emotional  
closeness, in a relationship

the one who overdrew our checking account last month,” she is challenging his control with a symmetrical response. Relational control is not negotiated in a single exchange, but through many message exchanges over time. The point, however, is that control is negotiated through communication.

**Intimacy** is the degree of emotional closeness in a relationship. When Cody asks Madison what she is thinking about, and Madison begins to pour out her problems, she is revealing a high level of intimacy in the relationship. If she replies, “Oh I’m not really thinking about anything important. Did you hear the news this morning about . . .,” her subject change may signal that the relationship is not intimate enough to share her problems.

## Communication Messages Vary in Conscious Thought

Recall that creating shared meaning involves encoding and decoding verbal messages, nonverbal cues, and even visual images. Our messages may (1) occur spontaneously, (2) be based on a “script,” or (3) be carefully constructed.

Many messages are **spontaneous expressions**, spoken without much conscious thought. For example, when you burn your finger, you may blurt out, “Ouch!” When something goes right, you may break into a broad smile. Some messages are *scripted* and drawn from our canned plan libraries. Finally, some are **constructed messages** that are formed carefully and thoughtfully when our known scripts are inadequate for the situation.

**spontaneous expressions**  
spoken without much conscious  
thought

**constructed messages**  
formed carefully and  
thoughtfully when our known  
scripts are inadequate for the  
situation

## Communication Is Guided by Cultural Norms

**Culture** may be defined as a system of shared beliefs, values, symbols, and behaviors. How messages are formed and interpreted depends on the cultural background of the participants. We need to be mindful of our communication behavior as we interact with others whose cultural backgrounds differ from our own, so we don’t unintentionally communicate in ways that are culturally inappropriate or insensitive.

According to Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) “a number of cultural components are particularly relevant to effective communication. These include (1) perception, (2) patterns of cognition, (3) verbal behaviors, (4) nonverbal behaviors, and (5) the influence of context” (p. 13). Because cultural concerns permeate all of communication, each chapter of this book points out when certain concepts and skills may be viewed differently by members of various cultural groups. The authors of the *Diverse Voices* feature found in many chapters in this text explain how they or their culture views a concept presented in the text.

**culture**  
a system of shared beliefs,  
values, symbols, and behaviors

## Communication Ethics

**Ethics** are moral principles held by a society, group, or individual that differentiate right from wrong. In other words, ethics reflect what we believe we “ought to” and “ought not to” think and do. Every field of study—from psychology and biology to sociology and history—has a set of ethical principles designed to guide the practice of that field. Communication is no exception. Every time we communicate, we make choices with ethical implications. The general principles that guide ethical communication include:

**ethics**  
a set of moral principles held by  
a society, group, or individual

1. **Ethical communicators are honest.** “An honest person is widely regarded as a moral person, and honesty is a central concept to ethics as the foundation for a moral life” (Terkel & Duval, 1999, p. 122). In other words, we should not intentionally try to deceive others.

2. **Ethical communicators act with integrity.** In other words, ethical communicators “practice what they preach.” The person who says, “Do what I say, not what I do,” lacks integrity. We often refer to such individuals as hypocrites. The person who “practices what he or she preaches” acts with integrity.
3. **Ethical communicators behave fairly.** A fair person attempts to be impartial. To be fair to someone is to gather all of the relevant facts, consider only circumstances relevant to the situation at hand, and not be swayed by prejudice. For example, if two siblings are fighting, their mother exercises fairness if she allows both children to explain “their side” before she decides what to do.
4. **Ethical communicators demonstrate respect.** Behaving respectfully means showing regard for others, including their point of view, their rights, and their feelings, even when they differ from ours.
5. **Ethical communicators are responsible.** Responsible communicators recognize the power of words. Our messages can hurt others and their reputations. So we act responsibly when we refrain from gossiping, spreading rumors, bullying, and so forth.

## Bright Side and Dark Side Messages

Interpersonal communication scholars, Spitzberg and Cupach (2011) came up with metaphors to characterize the differences between ethical/appropriate and unethical/inappropriate communication. They label messages that are both ethical and appropriate as **bright side messages**. In contrast, **dark side messages** are unethical and/or inappropriate. “Hard dark side” messages are somewhat ethical and unethical because they are honest, but also potentially damaging to the relationship. “Easy dark side” messages are somewhat ethical and unethical because they are dishonest in order to maintain a good relationship. Finally, “evil dark side” messages are both disrespectful and damaging to the relationship (see Figure 1.3).

Let’s use Liz as an example. She just spent a fortune having her hair cut and colored and asks her good friend, Pat, “Do you like my new hairstyle?” Pat, who doesn’t really like the new look, could respond to Liz as follows:

*Bright side response: “Liz, it doesn’t matter what I think. I can see that you really like how it looks and that makes me happy.” (This response is ethical and appropriate. It is both honest and respectful.)*

*Hard dark side response: “Wow Liz, it’s a dramatic change. I liked your hair long and I’d always admired the red highlights you had. But I’m sure it will grow on me.” (This response is honest but could hurt Liz’s feelings and damage the relationship.)*

*Easy dark side response: “It looks great.” (This response is dishonest but doesn’t hurt Liz’s feelings.)*

*Evil dark side response: “It doesn’t matter what you do to your hair, you’re still fat and ugly.” (This response is unethical and inappropriate. It is hurtful and damaging to Liz’s feelings and the relationship.)*

As you can see, relationships may benefit from bright, hard, and easy side responses depending on the situation. But dark side responses damage people and relationships.

**bright side messages**  
both ethical and appropriate

**dark side messages**  
not ethical and/or appropriate



**Figure 1.3**  
Understanding dark-side messages



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We often face ethical dilemmas and must sort out what is more or less right or wrong. In making these decisions, we reveal our ethical communication standards. Each chapter in this book features "A Question of Ethics" case related to material in that chapter. Consider each case and the questions we pose based on these ethical communication principles.

## Communication Competence

**communication competence**  
the impression that communicative behavior is both appropriate and effective in a given situation

**Communication competence** is the impression that communicative behavior is appropriate and effective in a given situation (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 375). Communication is *effective* when it achieves its goals and *appropriate* when it conforms to what is expected in a situation. Our goal is to communicate in ways that increase the likelihood that others will judge us as competent.

Communication competence is achieved through personal motivation, knowledge acquisition, and skills practice (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 377). First, we have to be *motivated*—that is, we must want to improve. Second, we must know what to do. Third, to improve, we must practice communication skills we learn.

**credibility**  
a perception of a speaker's knowledge, trustworthiness, and warmth

Credibility and social ease also influence whether others perceive us to be competent communicators. **Credibility** is a perception of a speaker's knowledge, trustworthiness, and warmth. Listeners are more likely to be attentive to and influenced by speakers they perceive as credible. **Social ease** means managing communication apprehension so we do not appear nervous or anxious. Communicators that appear apprehensive are not likely to be regarded as competent, despite their motivation or knowledge.

**social ease**  
communicating without appearing to be anxious or nervous

## Communication Apprehension

**communication apprehension**  
fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others

**Communication apprehension** is "the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Although most people think of public speaking anxiety when they hear the term *communication apprehension* (CA), there are actually four different types of CA (Photo 1.7). People who experience *traitlike communication apprehension* feel anxious in most speaking situations. About 20 percent of all people experience traitlike CA (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). People who experience *audience-based communication apprehension* feel anxious about speaking only with a certain person or group of people. *Situational communication apprehension* is a short-lived feeling



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of anxiety that occurs during a specific encounter, for example, during a job interview. Finally, *context-based communication apprehension* is anxiety only in a particular situation, for example, when speaking to a large group of people. All these forms of communication anxiety can be managed effectively in ways that help convey social ease. Throughout this book, we offer strategies for managing communication apprehension in various settings.

The combination of motivation, knowledge, skills, perceived credibility, and social ease make up competent communication. The goal of this book is to help you become a competent communicator in interpersonal, group, and public speaking situations.

**Photo 1.7** Does public speaking make you nervous? If so, you are like 75% of the population. Did you know that speaking effectively requires some nervousness?

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## COMMUNICATE ON YOUR FEET

### Speech Assignment

#### Introduce a Classmate

##### The Assignment

Following your instructor's directions, partner with someone in the class. Spend some time getting to know him or her and then prepare a short 2-minute speech introducing your partner to the rest of the class.

##### Questions to Ask

1. What is your background? (Where were you born and raised? What is the makeup of your family? What else do you want to share about your personal background?)
2. What are you majoring in and why?
3. What are some of your personal and professional goals after college?
4. What are two personal goals you have for this class and why?
5. What is something unique about you that most people probably don't know?

##### Speeches of Introduction

A speech of introduction is given to acquaint a group with someone they have not met. We make short "speeches" of introduction all the time. When a friend from high school comes to visit for a weekend, you may introduce her to your friends. Not only will you tell them her name, but you will probably mention other things about her that will make it easy for your friends to talk with her. Likewise, a store manager may call the sales associates together in order to introduce a new employee. The manager might mention the new team member's previous experience, interests, and expertise that will encourage the others to respect, help, and become acquainted with the new employee.

Speeches of introduction also often precede formal addresses. The goal of the introducer is to establish the credibility of the main speaker by sharing the speaker's education, background, and expertise related to the topic and to build audience interest.

#### Speech to Introduce a Classmate

Because your classmate will not be giving a formal address after you introduce him or her, we suggest you organize your speech as follows:

1. **The introduction:** Start with an attention catcher—a statement, story, or question tied to something about the speaker that will pique audience curiosity. Then offer a thesis and preview of main points, which can be as simple as "I'm here today to introduce [name of person] to you by sharing something about his personal background, personal and professional goals, and something unique about him."
2. **The body:** Group the information you plan to share under two to four main points. For example, your first main point might be "personal background," your second main point "personal and professional goals," and your third main point "something unique." Then offer two or three examples or stories to illustrate what you learned regarding each main point. Create a transition statement to lead from the first main point to the second main point, as well as from the second main point to the third main point. These statements should remind listeners of the main point you are concluding and introduce the upcoming main point. For example, "Now that you know a little bit about [name of person]'s personal background, let's talk about his personal and professional goals."
3. **The conclusion:** Remind listeners of the name of the classmate you introduced and the two to four main points you discussed about him or her. Then, end with a clincher—a short sentence that wraps the speech up by referring to something you said in the speech (usually in the introduction) that will encourage listeners to want to know him or her better.



## WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

### A Question of Ethics

Molly has just been accepted to Stanford Law School and calls her friend Terri to tell her the good news.

**MOLLY:** Hi Terri! Guess what? I just got accepted to Stanford Law!

**TERRI:** [*Surprised and disappointed*]: Oh, cool.

**MOLLY:** [*Sarcastic*]: Thanks—you sound so enthusiastic!

**TERRI:** Oh, I am. Listen, I have to go—I'm late for class.

**MOLLY:** Oh, OK. See you.

The women hang up, and Terri immediately calls her friend Monica.

**TERRI:** Monica, it's Terri.

**MONICA:** Hey, Terri. What's up?

**TERRI:** I just got some terrible news—Molly got into Stanford!

**MONICA:** So, what's wrong with that? I think it's great. Aren't you happy for her?

**TERRI:** No, not at all. I didn't get in, and I have better grades and a higher LSAT score.

**MONICA:** Maybe Molly had a better application.

**TERRI:** Or maybe it was what was on her application.

**MONICA:** What do you mean?

**TERRI:** You know what I mean. Molly's black.

**MONICA:** Yes, and . . . ?

**TERRI:** Don't you see? It's called affirmative action.

**MONICA:** Terri, give it a rest!

**TERRI:** Oh, please. You know it and I know it. She only got in because of her race and because she's poor. Her GPA is low and so is her LSAT score.

**MONICA:** Did you ever stop to think that maybe she wrote an outstanding essay? Or that they thought the time she spent volunteering in that free legal clinic in her neighborhood was good background?

**TERRI:** Yes, but we've both read some of her papers, and we know she can't write. Listen, Monica, if you're black, Asian, American Indian, Latino, or any other minority and poor, you've got it made. You can be as stupid as Jessica Simpson and get into any law school you want. It's just not fair at all.

**MONICA** [*Angrily*]: No, you know what isn't fair? I'm sitting here listening to my so-called friend insult my intelligence and my ethnic background. How dare you tell me that the only reason I'll ever get into a good medical school is because I'm Latino. Listen, honey, I'll get into medical school just the same way that Molly got into law school—because of my brains, my accomplishments, and my ethical standards. And based on this conversation, it's clear that Molly and I are way ahead of you.

Describe how well each of these women followed the ethical standards for communication discussed in this chapter.

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## Communication Improvement Plans

You can use a personal communication improvement plan to hone your skills and become a more competent communicator. As you read each chapter, select one or two skills to work on. Then write down your plan in four steps.

1. **Identify the problem:** "Even though some of the members of my class project group have not produced the work they promised, I haven't spoken up because I'm not very good at describing my feelings."

2. **State the specific goal:** "To describe my disappointment to other group members about their failure to meet deadlines." Hint: Be sure to identify a measurable outcome.
3. **Outline a specific procedure for reaching the goal:** "I will practice the steps of describing feelings. (1) I will identify the specific feeling I am experiencing. (2) I will encode the emotion I am feeling accurately. (3) I will include what has triggered the feeling. (4) I will own the feeling as mine. (5) I will then put that procedure into operation when I am talking with my group members."
4. **Devise a method for measuring progress:** "I will have made progress each time I describe my feelings to my group members about missed deadlines."

Figure 1.4 provides another example of a communication improvement plan, this one relating to a public speaking problem.

**Problem:** When I speak in class or in the student senate, I often find myself burying my head in my notes or looking at the ceiling or walls.

**Goal:** To look at people more directly when I'm giving a speech.

**Procedure:** I will take the time to practice oral presentations aloud in my room. (1) I will stand up just as I do in class. (2) I will pretend various objects in the room are people, and I will consciously attempt to look at those objects as I am talking. (3) When giving a speech, I will try to be aware of when I am looking at my audience and when I am not.

**Test for Achieving Goal:** I will have achieved this goal when I am maintaining eye contact with my audience most of the time.

**Figure 1.4**

Sample communication improvement plan

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## Reflection and Assessment

At its core, communication is the process of creating shared meaning whether in informal conversations, group interactions, or public speeches via flat print, face-to-face, or technology-enhanced channels. To assess how well you've learned what we addressed in these pages, answer the following questions. If you have trouble answering any of them, go back and review that material. Once you can answer each question accurately, you are ready to move ahead to read the next chapter.

1. What is the nature of communication and the role of canned plans and scripts in it?
2. Describe the process of communication and how interference may impact it.
3. What are the key characteristics of communication?
4. What does it mean to be an ethical communicator as related to bright side and dark side messages?
5. What is a competent communicator and what steps can you take to improve your communication competence?



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**COMMUNICATE!**

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**RESOURCE AND ASSESSMENT CENTER**

Now that you have read Chapter 1, go to your MindTap for *Communicate!* for quick access to the electronic resources that accompany this text.

**Applying What You've Learned**

**Impromptu Speech Activity**

Identify one of your "heroes." Your hero may or may not be famous. Identify one of the five ethical principles of communication this hero's life adheres to and why. In your two to three minute impromptu speech, provide at least two incidents that serve as evidence regarding how this person demonstrates/demonstrated the principle.

**Assessment Activities**

1. Visit your Facebook page. If you don't have an account, you might make one to observe while completing this course or ask a friend if you can look at theirs. Find one example of ethical communication, and describe the principles of ethical communication that it follows.
2. Find an example of unethical communication on Facebook and describe the principles that it doesn't follow.

**Skill-Building Activities**

**1. Identifying Elements of the Communication Process** For the following interaction, identify the message, channels, contexts, interference (noise), and feedback:

Maria and Damien are meandering through the park, talking and drinking bottled water. Damien finishes his bottle, replaces the lid, and tosses the bottle into the bushes at the side of the path. Maria, who has been listening to Damien talk, comes to a stop, stares at Damien, and says, "I can't believe what you just did!" Damien blushes, averts his gaze, and mumbles, "Sorry, I'll get it—I just wasn't thinking." As the tension drains from Maria's face, she smiles and says, "Well, just see that it doesn't happen again."

1. Message
2. Channels

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3. Contexts
  - a. Physical
  - b. Social
  - c. Historical
  - d. Psychological
4. Interference (noise)
5. Feedback

Complete this activity, and see the author's answers on MindTap for *Communicate!*.

**2. Communicating Over the Internet** Consider the advantages and disadvantages of communicating via the following Internet-based mediums: e-mail, news-groups, Blogs, iChat, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype. Enter your thoughts into a two-column table, with advantages in the first column and disadvantages in the second. Did your analysis produce any discoveries that surprised you?

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