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The Communication Process: Impersonal and Interpersonal

KATHLEEN M. GALVIN AND CHARLES A. WILKINSON

Communication is a complex, ongoing process that brings us together and maintains the ties with the people in our world. Some people view communication as a straightforward easy and effective exchange of messages between a speaker and a listener—one speaks while the other listens, and vice versa. This is a naive view. This chapter asserts that communication is a symbolic process of sharing meanings, or a complicated sense-making experience.

To interpret another's communication effectively involves finding the meanings of messages; those meanings are found in people, not in words. Your friend's meaning of "trust" or "happiness" may be quite different than yours. Even a presumably simple, concrete word can create misunderstandings. You may think of "vacation" as personal time spent away from the workplace with no thought of your job. Your boss may think "vacation" implies that employees will be away from the office but continuously available to discuss work-related issues via cell phone, e-mail, or Twitter. The closer both persons' meanings are, the easier it is to communicate effectively.

Communication is a continuous process that begins with a first encounter between people and

does not end until the last encounter in their lives, even though years may separate some interactions. These encounters may involve functional messages that serve practical purposes or, in cases of close ties, the encounters may also involve nurturing messages that convey a sense of caring and personal connection. Today, individuals are able to maintain ties with friends and family through digital media, such as Facebook, where messages are directed to a group of "friends," not to an individual, and where updates on another's life are readily visible and may influence future interactions with those who read the public posts. Over time, members of a relationship develop increasingly predictable communication patterns and, if participants become close, create a relational culture or similar worldview.

In the following pages, Kathleen Galvin and Charles Wilkinson address this complex issue, discussing the communication process as an ongoing symbolic interaction of sharing, exchanging, and coordinating meanings. Through various examples, they apply this understanding of the communication process to explain the difference between specific types of communication, such as interpersonal, impersonal, functional, and nurturing

communication. Finally, they explore and discuss the communication dynamics involved in relational culture, a very specific and unique type of interpersonal communication. This chapter lays the initial groundwork for exploring the question "How does communication work?" and establishes a basis of knowledge that prepares you for the chapters to follow. As you read this chapter, begin to formulate your answer to the question: What is communication?

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS:

IMPERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL

How often have you heard someone say, "We just can't communicate" or "Jack and I are having communication problems" or "Our group struggles with misunderstandings." These expressions occur regularly in everyday conversations as people struggle to solve a problem, start a relationship, manage a conflict, or find new ways to connect in an established relationship. Such struggles occur in all areas of life, in classrooms and offices, at kitchen tables, in board rooms, and on athletic fields. In our society people of different backgrounds come together to create relationships, solve problems or accomplish tasks, and they can find themselves frustrated by "communication breakdowns." Although these dissatisfactions are not new, they are heightened by the fact that we live in an information age in which effective communication is expected and valued in all areas of life.

Over time we have had the opportunity to listen to many different people discuss their interpersonal frustrations in classrooms, community groups, organizational settings, and family therapy sessions. Participants are invested in improving their abilities to manage certain situations, in analyzing their relationships, and developing new relational skills.

As we discuss interpersonal communication with others, we describe the communication process and its elements as well as the specific characteristics of *interpersonal* communication that distinguish it from *impersonal* communication. We also address the concept of relational culture,

or the development of a highly unique interpersonal relationship characterized by a unique system of meanings created and maintained by the partners or members of a group. Our hope is to encourage participants to develop their knowledge and skills in relationship development and relationship maintenance in various contexts. We will introduce these issues in the following pages.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Whenever we ask workshop participants how they would define communication we hear responses such as "transmitting ideas," "talking and listening," or "exchanging messages with others." Everyone has some notion of what it means to communicate with another and knows how it feels when communication attempts are successful or unsuccessful, yet many people have not thought deeply about the communication process itself. They assume communication works or it doesn't work, more as a matter of fate than as a process that can be changed or improved.

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

Symbolic

By saying that communication is symbolic, we mean that symbols are used to transmit messages. Symbols are representations of a person, event, place, or object. Words, or verbal expressions, are the most frequently understood communication symbols, but symbolic actions also include the whole range of nonverbal behaviors: facial expressions, vocal tone, eye contact, gestures, movement, body posture, appearance, context, and spatial distance. In addition, objects, ideas, and visual images serve symbols. For example, friends often exchange gifts, food, or e-mails as symbols of connectedness.

You have learned to use symbols to create and interpret messages. As a speaker (or sender)

you create messages by selecting the most appropriate symbols from a range of options in order to reach your intended receivers most effectively. As a listener (or receiver) you attempt to interpret the symbols others convey to you. Although exchanging appropriate symbols appears rather simple and straight forward, we are constantly amazed at the communication breakdowns that occur as symbols (verbal, nonverbal, and visual) are misinterpreted.

Effective communicators select the most appropriate symbols or messages for specific other persons and effectively interpret the intent of symbols exchanged with others. As a child you learned to create, or encode, one message to ask your father for money and another message to request a loan from your best friend. You learned to interpret your brother's gestures in order to determine if he was feeling sad, worried, or exhausted. You have learned who will be enraged if you roll your eyes at them, and who will interpret, or decode, your nonverbal cue as humorous. For effective communication to occur, the speaker and listener, or sender and receiver, must share the same meanings for the messages they exchange.

Process

Relational communication involves a process—dynamic and continuous process.

Each relationship develops its own communication history, an ongoing history that cannot be rewritten. Someone once said, "It's unfortunate you only get one chance to make a first impression." A relationship begins at the first moment of contact, with the first communication exchanged at a party, in a classroom, in a meeting or online. A relationship is initiated in any number of ways: a question, a glance, an introduction, a smile, or a Facebook invitation. Once contact is made, the relationship begins to develop its own unique history which is constructed and reflected in its communication patterns. A relationship's ongoing development may be interrupted by physical or psychological distance; relational partners may move in and out of each others' lives over many months or many years, but, no matter how long the relationship lasts, the history of the relationship

builds from that first meeting. Sometimes people say they wish to start over—to wipe out a difficult time period of their relationship or forget a painful argument that occurred. Individuals may choose to emphasize or deemphasize certain communication events throughout their relational history, but they can never go back to "how things used to be," or delete a piece of that history.

Although some models of communication portray it as a circular process, our preferred model for understanding this process comes from the thinking of Frank Dance (1976, Dance and Zak-Dance 1986), who proposed a helical representation. Imagine the form of a helix, in which the continuousness of the process is represented by the infinity sign (Figure 1.1). This model depicts the ever-widening scope of relationships as participants continuously reencounter each other, a process that continues indefinitely.

Whereas a circular model suggests that communication returns to the same place, the helical model implies the ever-changing, progressive, and evolving nature of relational interactions. The helix representation provides support for the concept that "You can't put a relationship into reverse and erase a difficult period of time." We have stopped counting the times we have heard, "If only things

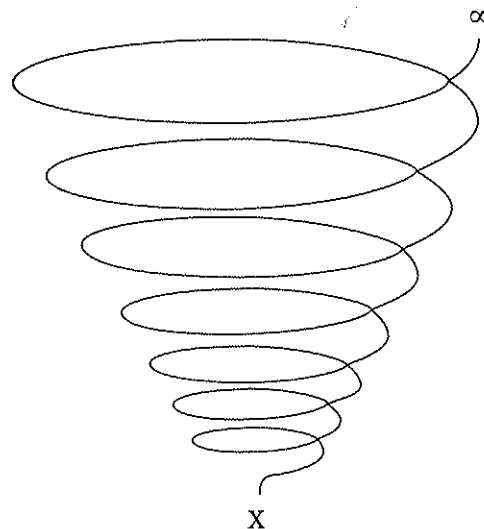


Figure 1-1

could go back to the way they were two years ago." Or "I want to wipe out the last six months of our marriage." In reality each encounter adds experience and meaning to a relationship; this history cannot be denied. People in relationships cannot wipe out a huge hurtful fight, long periods of verbal aggression or silence or, in romantic situations, an affair. Yet most friends, partners, or colleagues can learn to manage their relational history in effective ways, if they are conscious of "working on" or attending to the relationship. Research reveals the importance of relational maintenance efforts such as providing positive messages and assurances, openness, sharing interpersonal networks, sharing tasks, managing conflict, and providing advice and support.

Therefore, a conflictual father and son pair cannot pretend they never hurt one another with words or fists; friends cannot erase sarcastic comments. All they can do is work through the issues that currently keep them from dealing with each other in constructive or caring ways, and attempt to change their present communication patterns as they continue in their relational process. According to the helical model, such constructive interactions should begin to diminish the power of the previous destructive experiences. People can always *choose* to change, to do things differently. Such choices represent one of the most exciting and scary parts of the relational development process.

Sharing

Even though the words "speaker" and "listener" are commonly used to describe communicators, communication is not a process of trading messages. It does not resemble a poor tennis match in which Player A hits the ball and then stands there until Player B hits a return ball, and only then does Player A head toward the spot where the ball might bounce. In a good tennis match both players are always moving, anticipating where the ball might bounce on the return. Symbolic messages do not travel from Person A to Person B and back to Person A again in some turn-taking ritual. Rather, at its most basic level, communication requires mutual and continuous mutual involvement,

sometimes referred to as *the transactional nature of communication*. This mutual influence process is similar to a skilled tennis match in which both players are always in motion based on what they anticipate where the other player's ball will land. Similarly, in communication encounters both parties remain actively involved in the communication process. For example, even though Michael may appear more talkative, Vanessa conveys non-verbally that she is bored or pleased or annoyed, thus influencing Michael's choice of future messages. If Vanessa appears engaged, Michael is likely to continue to talk; if she appears uninterested, he is likely to limit his message. Both are actively and continuously involved in every moment of the interactions thus creating the mutual influence process that characterizes interpersonal interaction. Diagrammed, the transactional nature of communication looks like Figure 1-2.

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

If the definition of a relationship remains relatively unchanged, for example, boss and employee, romantic partners, parent and child, the nature of

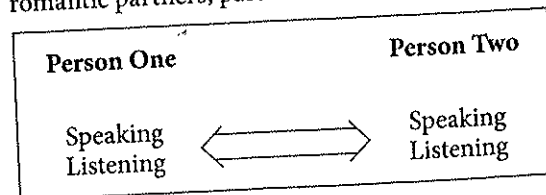


Figure 1-2

the communication process becomes fixed. A boss who constantly relates to staff members as incompetent may stifle their attempts to be innovative. A parent who treats children as responsible fosters their ability to handle new situations. This process is captured in the statement, "Over time we create an image of another person and relate to the image we create." Individuals construct an image of others through their interactions and relate to those realities they constructed. The attempt to understand and adapt to another represents a communication challenge.

Meanings

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

Each person's background, including physiological state, individual and family background, and unique experiences, influences how they perceive the world and attach meanings to symbols. The experience of being anxious, nearsighted, athletic, extroverted, dyslexic, artistic, or shy affects how you perceive the world and relate to others. Your family of origin (the family or families in which you were raised) served as your first communication classroom, teaching you how to interpret messages and how to use specific communication strategies to manage key relational issues such as intimacy and conflict. In addition, your gender, cultural background, socioeconomic level, religious, and educational experiences influence your perceptions. Males and females are socialized into various ways to express caring and commitment in relationships. Some cultures value big hugs, multiple-course meals, and shouting voices as symbols of caring; others emphasize restraint and understanding subtle cues. If you grew up in a lower-middle-

class neighborhood, you may have different meanings for money than someone who grew up in an affluent community.

Finally, your own unique circumstances influence how you assign meanings. A painful custody battle affects how you consider new romantic relationships. Early school experiences influence how you participate in college classes. Living abroad affects how willing you are to interact with people of different cultures.

Fortunately most people report many similar experiences, but no two people develop the same set of meanings. Each is a unique entity with particular meanings for certain symbols. For you, \$100 may represent a *large* purchase for one person, but your partner assumes that only purchases above \$500 are *large*. Your nickname for a friend may seem funny to you and insulting to your friend. Avoidance may be viewed as an acceptable or terrible way to resolve conflicts. Breakdowns in communication often occur because of missed meanings. Only with knowledge and empathy can you walk in someone else's shoes, experience the world from a different perspective, and create messages which reflect the other's point of view.

Frequently, communicators focus solely on the words rather than the range of nonverbal messages, which are central to interpreting a speaker's meaning. At any point in time, each communicator contributes to the interaction and experiences the transactional nature of the communication process. Effective communication requires the psychological presence of both parties; their attention and investment in the interaction serves to enhance communication effectiveness.

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

I need more *respect* from you.

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

Each of the italicized words receives many different responses. Depending on the speaker, more

respect may imply: (1) listening to me, (2) asking for my opinion, or (3) following my advice. *Trust* may imply: (1) keeping what I say confidential, (2) telling me your real feelings, or (3) telling me when a painful event happens. These are only examples of the many meanings that people have for the terms "respect" and "trust." Shared meanings are critical because they help to create the context for a relationship in which participants learn to predict how the other will react to particular verbal and nonverbal messages.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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

Interpersonal communication occurs when two or more people engage in voluntary, ongoing, interdependent interactions that involve meaningful interpretation of verbal and nonverbal messages. This implies that all parties view the relationship as significant, and choose to continue to relate to each other and deepen the relationship over time, making it increasingly unique. Many of these relationships are formed voluntarily, often involving friendships and romantic relationships among peers. In the case of involuntary relationships, such as those with teachers or co-workers, the person with the less power usually adapts to the person in charge, setting up a hierarchical interaction pattern. Yet, even involuntary relationships may develop strong interpersonal ties. You may interact with particular teachers or managers over time, develop a more horizontal interaction pattern, and eventually develop a strong interpersonal relationship.

Relationships move from impersonal to increasingly personal as closeness and trust develops. It is valuable to think about relationships on



Figure 1.3

a continuum from impersonal to interpersonal, understanding that a particular relationship may move forward and backward at different points in time.

Patterns

Communication in ongoing relationships becomes patterned. Some friends can give each other a look, or use a phrase, and their meaning is conveyed. The more intense and personal the relationship, the more unique relational patterns develop. Relational patterns involve verbal and nonverbal communication acts that are recurring and relationship defining. People in highly developed relationships display unique interaction patterns. For example, you may know that you and Tony will joke around when you see each other, whereas you and Alberto will talk about computer games. You may share your romantic problems with Sarah but not with Gail. Observing an ongoing significant relationship, you may see a remarkably complex pattern, similar to a dance, emerge. For example:

- X makes a statement, Y answers with a complaint, X makes a joke
- A asks for help, B counters with sarcasm, A whines, B assists
- C raises a sensitive topic, D looks intently at A, C continues, D listens quietly

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

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

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

"We? You mean *me*, don't you?"

"No, I mean *we*. I didn't say 'you.' I said '*we*.' You or me."

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

A moment to think. "No."

"Then you mean 'me,' don't you?"

"Yeah."

Some version of this interaction pattern may occur weekly between these partners as they negotiate tasks.

FUNCTIONAL AND NURTURING COMMUNICATION

Everyday communication tends to be dominated by functional rather than nurturing interactions. *Functional communication* involves managing day to day necessities and exchanging impersonal information such as, getting plans coordinated, meals fixed, schedules arranged—all the details that keep life running smoothly. We estimate that 80 to 90 percent of the communication that goes on between friends or colleagues, parents and children, and even spouses or partners tends to be functional communication. If the necessary and desirable functional interactions are not accompanied by communication that is *more personal*, distance characterizes the impersonal ties.

Nurturing communication occurs when participants exchange messages that are caretaking of the relationship—messages that indicate that the relationship is valued. Such nurturing communication may include intimate relational currencies such as: a hug, a thinking-of-you text message, affectionate teasing, or a label of "best friend." Nurturing communication involves emotional closeness and open conversation. People who nurture each other confirm the other's existence—"You are there; I recognize you."

Everyone needs to experience nurturing messages. Coworkers, friends, and family members can all be involved some level of this supportive communication. Individuals who have been nurtured are likely to be good nurturers; those who have not been nurtured can learn to nurture others, but often this takes conscious effort and hard

work. Nurturing communication serves as the life blood of any significant relationship. Without it, the relationship remains static and functional; with it, the relationship renews itself through continual growth.

RELATIONAL CULTURE

Persons in strong, highly developed interpersonal relationships eventually create their own *relational culture*. Julia Wood (2007) captures the essence of a relational culture as "a private world of rules, understandings, meanings, and patterns of acting and interpreting that partners create for their relationship" (p.308). Relational cultures involve a jointly constructed worldview, a personally developed set of understandings that affect the attitudes, actions, and identities of the relational partners. Over time many partners or best friends adapt to each other until they experience an evolving, unique set of meanings that are reflected in their relational culture. These private meanings, conveyed verbally and nonverbally, separate the partnership from other relationships; nicknames, joint storytelling, inside jokes, and code words contribute to the creation of a "world built for two." Relational cultures are constructed, maintained, or changed through communication. A strong relational culture is the hallmark of an intense, intimate interpersonal relationship.

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

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QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Identify and describe a relationship you have observed that exhibits high levels of nurturing messages. Give examples of three different types and the situations in which these currencies are used.
2. Think about a situation in which two or more differences in the communicator's backgrounds (e.g., gender, culture, age, socioeconomic status, religion) contributed to misunderstandings. Describe one communication breakdown

identifying differences that led to misunderstandings or serious problems.

3. How does the helical model of communication relate to your life? Think about communication in a significant relationship in your life that has included difficult or frustrating experiences. Describe how you and the other person have managed to deal with painful or conflictual times in your relational history and continued to move on.

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