
Principles of Interpersonal Communication

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A famous saying asserts, "The last creature to discover water would be a fish." Fish spend their lives swimming in water, a taken-for-granted environment. Because humans live in a world in which communication is ubiquitous, or surrounds us, usually we take it for granted and do not stop to consider how communication influences our everyday lives and how effectively or ineffectively we communicate with others in our lives. Yet we also spend much of our lives watching and listening to others as we negotiate each day's activities.

Most people seldom stop to consider the complexity of the communication process. If such moments of reflection do occur, they are likely brought about by unusual experiences that force us to stop and reflect on what just happened or what might happen. Those of you who have grown up speaking another language than English or who lived in a non-English speaking country or community for a period of time were forced to think about communication when you encountered confusion or difficulty as you interacted with English speakers. You had to reflect on what might account for the confusion, and what alternative means, such as nonverbal signals or a local interpreter, you could

use to accomplish your goals. You had to attend to the communication process.

In addition to issues of language use, there are moments of wonder or frustration created through communication interactions that also catch our attention. This may include a first social encounter with a friend of a friend that lasted for hours because you identified so many similarities in backgrounds, interests, or beliefs that your conversation flowed easily and with excitement. The reverse may occur also. You could find yourself discussing a serious issue, such as immigration or religion, with a good friend when sharp differences emerge and you find your friend's position totally unpredictable and unacceptable. You may be left wondering how this friendship could have developed without recognizing such areas of difference. In either case, the communication process emerges as an area of reflection.

Many individuals believe communication just happens naturally; there is no need to study it or think about it. Yet, in our current world we are surrounded by communication breakdowns among individuals, groups, and nations that necessitate extensive informal or formal interactions aimed at reducing the tensions that endanger relationships and, in some cases,

lives. Communication breakdowns between professionals and clients result in patients who receive poor levels of medical care or students who misunderstand teachers' expectations. Friends and family members encounter countless confusions due to unclear or unexpressed expectations or demands.

Today, increasing numbers of students are enrolling in graduate and undergraduate communication classes because they recognize the needs for such a background due to experiences in their workplace or in their personal lives. They are not looking for simple answers or simple tricks; rather they are searching for ways to think about human interaction, for theories and concepts to help them analyze communicative situations, and for a set of communication competencies that will serve them well in the future. These students hope to be better pediatricians, science teachers, office managers, and travel agents. They need to work well in professional groups as they design bridges, create computer applications and tend to patients. Some hope to improve communication with their parents or their children, partners, or close friends.

Some of these students become fascinated with the concept of metacommunication, or communication about communication, because they never really thought about the skill of "going to the meta level," talking with a boss or child about the way communication in their relationship is working. Others learn to appreciate the complexity of meaning and learn to pay close attention to the context or learn to ask for feedback on their communication attempts. Many students had not considered the issues of interpersonal ethics and the impact that their messages might have on another person. Essentially these students become much more reflective about their communication as well as more skilled in interaction. Finally, some students come to believe that they can learn to change the ways they interact with others, instead of just reacting to situations without considering the impact of their messages.

In the following chapter the author, Julia Wood, describes eight principles of communication, some of which may surprise you or challenge your beliefs about the communication process. She begins by reminding you that communication is ubiquitous, a constant in life, and ends with the hopeful assertion

that interpersonal communication effectiveness can be learned. In between, you will understand the critical importance of metacommunication and the ongoing importance of interpersonal across your lifespan, among other ideas. These principles will serve you well as you move through the later chapters in the text.

Our first look at interpersonal communication suggests eight basic principles for effectiveness.

PRINCIPLE 1: WE CANNOT NOT COMMUNICATE

Whenever people are together, they communicate. We cannot avoid communicating when we are with others, because they interpret what we do and say as well as what we do and don't say. Even if we choose to be silent, we're communicating. What we mean by silence and how others interpret it depend on cultural backgrounds.

Because Westerners typically are more verbal than many cultural groups, they are likely to regard silence as a signal of lack of knowledge, anger, or disinterest. Some Native Americans and members of many Eastern cultures might interpret some silence as thoughtfulness or respect. Either way, silence communicates.

Even when we don't intend to communicate, we do so. We may be unaware of a grimace that gives away our disapproval or an eye roll that shows we dislike someone, but we are communicating nonetheless. Unconscious communication often occurs on the relationship level of meaning as we express feelings about others through the subtle, often nonverbal communication. Regardless of whether we aim to communicate and whether others understand our intentions, we continuously, unavoidably communicate.

PRINCIPLE 2: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS IRREVERSIBLE

Perhaps you have been in heated arguments in which you lost your temper and said something you later regretted. It could be that you hurt

someone or revealed something about yourself that you meant to keep private. Later, you might have tried to repair the damage by apologizing, explaining what you said, or denying what you revealed. But you couldn't erase your communication; you couldn't unsay what you said. You may have had similar experiences when communicating by email. Perhaps you read a message that made you mad, and you dashed off a pointed reply, sent it, and then wished you could unsend it. The fact that communication is irreversible reminds us that what we say and do matters. It has impact. Once we say something to another person, our words become part of the relationship. Remembering this principle keeps us aware of the importance of choosing when to speak and what to say—or not to say!

PRINCIPLE 3: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION INVOLVES ETHICAL CHOICES

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that focuses on moral principles and codes of conduct. Ethical issues concern right and wrong. Because interpersonal communication is irreversible and affects others, it always has ethical implications. What we say and do affects others: how they feel, how they perceive themselves, how they think about themselves, and how they think about others. Thus, responsible people think carefully about ethical guidelines for communication. For instance, should you not tell someone something that might make him less willing to do what you want? If you read a message in a chat room that makes you angry, do you fire off a nasty reply, assuming that you will never meet the person and so won't face any consequences? Do you judge another person's communication from your own individual perspective and experience? Or do you try to understand her communication on her terms and from her perspective? In work settings, should you avoid giving negative feedback because it could hurt others' feelings? In these and many other instances, we face ethical choices.

Richard Johannesen (1996) has devoted most of his career to studying the ethical aspects of human communication. He says that ethical

communication occurs when people create relationships of equality, when they attend mindfully to each other, and when their communication demonstrates that they are authentic, empathic, supportive, and confirming of each other. Because interpersonal communication affects us and others, ethical considerations are always part of our interactions. Throughout this book, we note ethical issues that arise when we interact with others. As you read, consider what kinds of choices you make and what moral principles guide your choices.

PRINCIPLE 4: PEOPLE CONSTRUCT MEANINGS IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Human beings construct the meanings of their communication. The significance of communication doesn't lie in words and nonverbal behaviors. Instead, meaning arises out of how we interpret communication. This calls our attention to the fact that humans use symbols, which sets us apart from other creatures.

Symbols, such as words, have no inherently true meanings. Instead, we must interpret them. What does it mean if someone says, "You're sick"? To interpret the comment, you must consider the context (a counseling session, a professional meeting, after a daredevil stunt), who said it (a psychiatrist, a supervisor, a subordinate, a friend, an enemy), and the words themselves, which may mean various things (a medical diagnosis, a challenge to your professional competence, a compliment on your zani-ness, disapproval).

In interpersonal communication, people continuously interpret each other. Although typically we're not aware that we assign meanings, inevitably we do so. Someone you have been dating suggests some time away from each other, a friend turns down invitations to get together, or your supervisor at work seems less open to conversations with you than in the past. The meanings of such communications are neither self-evident nor inherent in the words. Instead, we construct their significance. In close relationships, partners gradually coordinate meanings so that they share

understandings of issues and feelings important to their connection. When a relationship begins, one person may regard confrontation as healthy, and the other may avoid arguments. Over time, partners come to share meanings for conflict—what it is, how to handle it, and whether it threatens the relationship or is a path to growth.

The meanings we attribute to conflict and other aspects of communication are shaped by cultural backgrounds. Because standing up for your own ideas is emphasized in the United States, many people who were born and raised in this country value confrontation more than do many Asians who were raised in traditional Asian families. Conflict means different things to each group.

BYRON: Sometimes my buddies and I will call each other the “boy” or even “black boy,” and we know we’re just kidding around. But if a white calls me “boy,” I get real mad. It doesn’t mean the same thing when they call is “boy” that it does when we call ourselves “boy.”

Even one person’s meanings vary over time and in response to experiences and moods. If you’re in a good mood, a playful gibe might strike you as funny or as an invitation to banter. The same remark might hurt or anger you if you’re feeling down. The meaning of the gibe, like all communication, is not preset or absolute. Meanings are created by people as they communicate in specific contexts.

PRINCIPLE 5: METACOMMUNICATION AFFECTS MEANINGS

The word *metacommunication* comes from the prefix *meta*, meaning “about,” and the root word *communication*. Thus, *metacommunication* is communication about communication. For example, during a conversation with your friend Pat, you notice that Pat’s body seems tense and her voice is sharp. You might say, “You seem really stressed.” Your statement metacommunicates about Pat’s nonverbal communication.

Metacommunication may be verbal or nonverbal. We can use words to talk about other words or nonverbal behaviors. If an argument between

Joe and Marc gets out of hand, and Joe makes a nasty personal attack, Joe might say, “I didn’t really mean what I just said. I was so angry it came out.” This metacommunication may soften the hurt caused by the attack. If Joe and Marc then have a productive conversation about their differences, Marc might conclude by saying, “This has really been a good talk. I think we understand each other a lot better now.” This comment verbally metacommunicates about the conversation that preceded it.

We also metacommunicate nonverbally. Nonverbal metacommunication often reinforces verbal communication. For example, you might nod your head while saying, “I really don’t know what you mean.” Or you might move away from a person after you say, “I don’t want to see you anymore.” Yet, not all nonverbal metacommunication reinforces verbal messages. Sometimes, our nonverbal expressions contradict our verbal messages. When teasing a friend, you might wink to signal you don’t mean the teasing to be taken seriously. Or you might smile when you say to a friend who drops by, “Oh rats—you again!” The smile tells the friend you welcome the visit despite your comment to the contrary.

Metacommunication can increase understanding. For instance, teachers sometimes say, “The next point is really important.” This comment signals students to pay special attention to what follows. A parent might tell a child, “What I said may sound harsh, but I’m only telling you because I care about you.” The comment tells the child how to interpret a critical message. A manager tells a subordinate to take a comment seriously by saying, “I really mean what I said. I’m not kidding.” On the other hand, if we’re not really sure what we think about an issue, and we want to try out a stance, we might say, “I’m thinking this through as I go, and I’m not really wedded to this position, but what I tend to believe right now is . . .” This preface to your statement tells listeners not to assume that what you say is set in stone.

We can also metacommunicate to check on understanding: “Was I clear?” “Do you see why I feel like I do?” “Can you see why I’m confused

about the problem?" Questions such as these allow you to find out whether another person understands what you intend to communicate. You may also metacommunicate to find out whether you understand what another person expresses to you. "What I think you meant is that you are worried. Is that right?" "If I follow what you said, you feel trapped between what you want to do and what your parents want you to do. Is that what you were telling me?" You may even say, "I don't understand what you just told me. Can you say it another way?" This question metacommunicates by letting the other person know you did not grasp her message and that you want to understand.

Effective metacommunication also helps friends and romantic partners express how they feel about their interactions. Linda Acitelli (1988, 1993) has studied what happens when partners in a relationship talk to each other about how they perceive and feel about their interaction. She reports that women and men alike find metacommunication helpful if there is a conflict or problem that must be addressed. Both sexes seem to appreciate knowing how the other feels about their differences; they are also eager to learn how to communicate to resolve those differences. During a conflict, one person might say, "I feel like we're both being really stubborn. Do you think we could each back off a little from our positions?" This expresses discontent with how communication is proceeding and offers an alternative. After conflict, one partner might say, "This really cleared the air between us. I feel a lot better now."

TARA: I never feel like an argument is really over and settled until Andy and I have said that we feel better for having thrashed out whatever was the problem. It's like I want closure, and the fight isn't really behind us until we both say, "I'm glad we talked," or something to say what we went through led us to a better place.

Acitelli also found that women are more likely than men to appreciate metacommunication when there is no conflict or immediate problem to be resolved. While curled up on a sofa and watching TV, a woman might say to her male partner, "I really

feel comfortable snuggling with you." This comments on the relationship and on the nonverbal communication between the couple. According to research by Acitelli and others (Wood, 1997, 1998), men generally find talk about relationships unnecessary unless there is an immediate problem to be addressed. Understanding this gender difference in preferences for metacommunication may help you interpret members of the other sex more accurately.

PRINCIPLE 6: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION DEVELOPS AND SUSTAINS RELATIONSHIPS

Interpersonal communication is the primary way we build, refine, and transform relationships. Partners talk to work out expectations and understandings of their interaction, appropriate and inappropriate topics and styles of communicating, and the nature of the relationship itself. Is it a friendship or a romantic relationship? How much and in what ways can we count on each other? How do we handle disagreements—by confronting them, ignoring them, or using indirect strategies to restore harmony? What are the bottom lines, the "shalt not" rules for what counts as unforgivable betrayal? What counts as caring—words, deeds, both? Because communication has no intrinsic meanings, we must generate our own in the course of interaction.

Communication also allows us to construct or reconstruct individual and joint histories. For instance, when people fall in love, they often redefine former loves as "mere infatuations" or "puppy love" but definitely not the real thing. When something goes wrong in a relationship, partners may work together to define what happened in a way that allows them to continue. Marriage counselors report that couples routinely work out face-saving explanations for affairs so that they can stay together in the aftermath of infidelity (Scarf, 1987). Partners often talk about past events and experiences that challenged them, and ones that were joyous. The process of reliving the past reminds partners how long they have been together and how much they have shared.

As partners communicate thoughts and feelings, they generate shared meanings for themselves, their interaction, and their relationship.

Communication is also the primary means by which intimates construct a future for themselves, and a vision of shared future is one of the most powerful ties that link people (Dixson & Duck, 1993; Wood, 2006). Romantic couples often dream together by talking about the family they plan and how they'll be in 20 years. Likewise, friends discuss plans for the future and promise reunions if they must move apart. Communication allows us to express and share dreams, imaginings, and memories and to weave all of these into the joint world of relational patterns.

KAREN: I love talking about the future with my fiancé. Sometimes, we talk for hours about the kind of house we'll have and what our children will be like and how we'll juggle two careers and a family. I know everything won't work out exactly like we think now, but talking about it makes me feel so close to Dave and like our future is real.

PRINCIPLE 7: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS NOT A PANACEA

As we have seen, we communicate to satisfy many of our needs and to create relationships with others. Yet it would be a mistake to think communication is a cure-all. Many problems can't be solved by talk alone. Communication by itself won't end hunger, abuses of human rights around the globe, racism, intimate partner violence, or physical diseases. Nor can words alone bridge irreconcilable differences between people or erase the hurt of betrayal. Although good communication may increase understanding and help us solve problems, it will not fix everything. We should also realize that the idea of talking things through is distinctly Western. Not all societies think it's wise or useful to communicate about relationships or to talk extensively about feelings. Just as interpersonal communication has many strengths and values, it also has limits, and its effectiveness is shaped by cultural contexts.

PRINCIPLE 8: INTERPERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS CAN BE LEARNED

It is a mistake to think that effective communicators are born, that some people have a natural talent and others don't. Although some people have extraordinary talent in athletics and writing, all of us can become competent athletes and writers. Likewise, some people have an aptitude for communicating, but all of us can become competent communicators. This book and the course you are taking should sharpen your understandings of how interpersonal communication works and should help you learn skills that will enhance your effectiveness in relating to others.

QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS

1. Describe three situations in which you heard a communicator use metacommunication. Briefly explain the circumstances, describe what the individual said that called for metacommunication, and the impact of metacommunication on the effectiveness of the ongoing interactions.
2. Under what conditions have you observed others attempting to make ethical choices about what they are saying? Describe one situation and explain what you believe was the effect of such an attempt. Under what circumstances do you find yourself having to consider the ethical impact of your messages?
3. What is your position on the following claim: "Great communicators are born, not made." Give reasons for your position.

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