

Communication is an intriguing topic to study because, on the one hand, you and I have been doing it since at least the day we were born, so we have some claim to being “experts,” and on the other hand, many of the difficulties that people experience are communication difficulties, which suggests that we all have a lot to learn. If your communication life is trouble-free, this book and the course it is probably a part of might not be for you. But if your experience is anything like mine, you might be interested in some help. After over 40 years of communication study and teaching, I still experience plenty of misunderstandings, but I’ve found that some basic insights about what communication is and how it works can smooth many of the rough spots. That’s why this introduction describes the general subject matter of communication and this book’s specific focus, interpersonal communication. I don’t want to make too much out of “defining our terms,” but as I think you’ll discover, there are some common ways of thinking about these topics that can actually make things harder rather than easier. And there are some important features of communication and interpersonal communication that significantly affect how they work.

## COMMUNICATING<sup>1</sup>

In the most general sense, the terms “communication” and “communicating” label *the continuous, complex, collaborative process of verbal and nonverbal meaning-making*. When somebody says, “She’s a good communicator” or “We communicate well,” it basically means that contacts with these persons tend to go smoothly and that there aren’t many confusions or misunderstandings, which is to say that the meanings the people build together generally work okay. By the same token, people talk about “poor communication” when they experience confusing, ambiguous, frustrating, disrespectful, or incomplete meanings.

The word “continuous” in the definition reminds us that communication was going on when we were born and it will continue well after we’re dead. “Complex” means that there are many elements or dimensions of every communicative event, including facial expression, tone of voice, choice of words, past history, and social roles, among dozens of other factors. The words “verbal and

nonverbal” highlight the two basic codes that humans work with. And the term “collaborative” just means that we co-labor, or work together on the meanings we make. Even when two parties are in the midst of a violent disagreement, they are still co-constructing their meanings of anger, hostility, fairness, and respect. So whether you’re talking about written or spoken communication, face-to-face or computer-mediated, conflict or cooperation, the process basically involves humans making meaning together.

Meaning is what makes the human world different from the spaces inhabited by other living beings—worms, dogs and cats, and even, so far as we now know, chimpanzees, whales, and dolphins. Since humans live in worlds of meaning—rather than worlds made up of only objects or things—communication is a major part of human living.

To clarify this idea that humans live in worlds of meaning, consider the part of your world that’s your “home.” If someone asked you to describe your home, you probably wouldn’t just talk about how many square feet it has, how tall it is, how far it is from your home to some prominent landmark, or what color the bedroom walls are (objective features). Instead, you’d talk about what it *means* to live in a place this small or this big, what you think and feel about the wall color, and what it *means* to live where your home is located. Similarly, the transportation part of your world is significant not simply because you travel by bike or on a bus, in your own old or new SUV or convertible, or on foot or on a motorcycle, but because of what it *means* in your family, group of friends, and culture to get around this way. And the meanings of all these parts of our worlds get built up (constructed) and changed in communication—the written and oral, verbal and nonverbal contact people have with each other.

When each of us was born, this process of meaning-making was going on all around us, and we entered it kind of like a chunk of potato when it’s plopped into a pot of simmering soup. The soup was there before we were born, it will be simmering all the time we’re alive, and these communication processes will continue after we die. As individuals and groups, we certainly affect our worlds a whole lot more than a chunk of potato affects a pot of soup. But each of us is also a participant in an ongoing process that we do not completely control, a process as old and as vast as the history of humanity. All the time, everywhere, in all the contacts that make us social animals, humans are constructing meaning together, and “communication” is the name of this ongoing process.

*Interpersonal communication* is a subset of this general process, a particular kind or type of communication. I’ll describe what it is later. But first I want to explain six important features of all kinds of communication, the first of which I’ve already introduced, and an important implication or practical application of each of the six:

**Communication Is the Continuous, Complex, Collaborative Process of Verbal and Nonverbal Meaning-Making** As I mentioned before, it's *continuous* because humans are always making meaning—figuring out, making sense of, or interpreting what's happening. It's *complex* because it involves not just words and ideas but also intonation, facial expression, eye contact, touch, and several other nonverbal elements, and it always includes identity and relationship messages, culture and gender cues, more or less hidden agendas, unspoken expectations, and literally dozens of other features that usually become apparent only when they create problems. It's *collaborative*, because we do it with other people; we don't communicate alone.<sup>5</sup> "Co-labor-ating" just means working together, and collaboration can be as anonymous as obeying traffic laws and speaking the local language, or as intimate as attending to your partner's love-making preferences.

**Implication 1: No One Person Can Completely Control a Communication Event, and No Single Person or Action Causes—or Can Be Blamed for—a Communication Outcome** Many people come to communication classes or workshops wanting to learn how to "do it right." They want to know how to *solve* the communication problems they experience—get their parents off their backs; eliminate misunderstandings with roommates, co-workers, or dating partners; deal with a critical and complaining boss; end a painful relationship; become a masterful salesperson. Some of these people want to learn the surefire techniques that will give them control over their communication lives. These people are disappointed, and some are even angry, when they learn that it isn't that simple. They are even more uncomfortable when they learn that it's an illusion to believe that surefire techniques of human communication even exist! As philosopher William Barrett put it over 30 years ago in his book *The Illusion of Technique*, "Technical thinking cannot deal with our human problems."<sup>6</sup>

I don't mean that technical thinking is hopeless or that there's nothing to be gained from scientific and social scientific experiments. But one direct implication of the recognition that communication is a *collaborative* process is that no one person can completely control any communication event and no technique or set of communication moves can definitely determine its outcome.

Regardless of how clearly I write or speak, you may still interpret me in a variety of ways. Regardless of how carefully I plan a meeting, one or more people are likely to have agendas very different from mine. Even a successful dictator whose orders are consistently followed can't control how people understand or feel about his or her demands. And as I mentioned, even though I've been working on my communication for years, I still experience difficulties that I cannot completely predict or control in relationships with family members, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances.

I believe that your skill as a communicator will be enhanced if you try to manage your expectations about control and perfection. The more you understand how communication works and the more communication skills you develop, the more effective and competent you will be. It is possible to learn how to give and get criticism gracefully, to manage conflict effectively, and to develop relationships smoothly. But not 100 percent of the time.

Cause-effect, fault-blame thinking is one of the oversimplifications people often fall into. I won't repeat what I said in the discussion of John and Judy's communication, but I do want to reemphasize it in this context. Problems obviously happen in communication, and the choices of the people involved help create, maintain, worsen, and solve these problems. But when you understand that communication is *continuous*, *complex*, and *collaborative*, you cannot coherently blame one person or one set of actions for whatever you might see as problematic. For one thing, fault and blame ignore the continuousness of communication. In order to say someone is at fault, you need to assume that whatever happened *began with the guilty person's action*. But all the people involved have been engaged in communication literally since they were born and have developed and reinforced each other's ways of speaking, listening, and interpreting since at least the time they met. So the person whom you say is at fault because he didn't call you back to confirm the meeting may be remembering your complaints about "getting all those annoying calls" and your insistence that it's only necessary to call if meeting plans change.

Fault and blame also ignore the fact that communication is collaborative. When directions are unclear, for example, it's due to both the direction-giver and the direction-receiver. Did the receiver ask about what confused her? Did the giver check the receiver's understanding? It may have seemed perfectly legitimate to one person to assume that everybody understood that the meeting was at 8:00 P.M. and not 8:00 A.M., for example, or that the family would gather for the holiday dinner just like they had in the past. But others might have radically different assumptions that lead to significantly different interpretations.

Does this mean that when there are problems, nobody's responsible? Does this idea eliminate any possibility of accountability? No, not at all. Individual responses still make a difference, and some are definitely more ethical, appropriate, or humane than others. But I'm trying to replace the oversimplified and distorted notions of fault and blame with a broader focus on both or all "sides" of the communication process. I do not mean to replace "It's his fault" with "It's her fault," "It's both of their faults," or "It's nobody's fault." Instead,

I encourage you to give up the notion of fault altogether, at least when you're thinking or talking about human communication.

Another way to put this point is to say that this view of communication redefines what responsibility means. Traditionally, being responsible means that you *caused* something to happen, that it was your fault. But from the perspective I'm developing here, responsibility means *ability to respond*, not fault, blame, or credit. It means "*response-able*." You are response-able when you have the willingness and the ability to contribute in some way to how things are unfolding, rather than ignoring what's going on or dropping out of the event. "Irresponsible" people are not responsive; they act without taking into account what else is going on or how their actions may influence others. Responsible (response-able) actions consider the larger wholes that they help make up. This idea is related to the basic skill of "nexting" that's discussed in feature 6.

## 2. Choice: All Communication Involves Choices, Some of Which People Actively Consider, and Others That Follow Cultural Norms and Seem Almost Automatic

Human meanings are inherently ethical because they involve choices. Individually and collectively, humans create and abide by guidelines for evaluating actions as right or wrong, good or bad, and appropriate or inappropriate. These ethical standards influence people's actions but do not always determine them. Interpersonal communication, as I'll explain, involves reflective and responsive choices.

Some of the choices people make don't feel much like choices. For example, shaking hands and bowing are two culturally influenced actions that one may choose to engage in when meeting another person for a business lunch. Although decisions about how long and how firmly to shake a hand or how deep to bow may be something you actively consider, the initial behavior of shaking or bowing may not be. You may not actively choose the tone of voice you use with your sibling in the same way you may consider how to talk with your best friend, because the norms for interaction in your family culture may be taken for granted, but not in your friendship.

**Implication 2: The Choices Communicators Make Reveal Their Ethical Standards and Commitments** Consider the issue of shoplifting food from a grocery store, for example. Many people admit to stealing a candy bar as a kid, a choice made for the thrill, as a response to peer pressure, or just because they wanted one and didn't have the money at the time. They might have had an ethical standard that stealing was wrong and another, competing standard that the adrenaline rush, fitting in with friends, or immediate gratification was good. They had to choose between competing standards, and in this case, the stealing-is-wrong ethic carried less weight. Other people cannot understand how anyone could ever decide to steal. For these people, the stealing-is-wrong ethical standard is more heavily weighted, perhaps in response to explicit lessons from

family, teachers, or a religious community. But whether you would or would not steal something from a grocery store, how would you evaluate an individual who had been involuntarily unemployed for months, exhausted the limited resources of the local food bank, and had decided that the only way members of her family would eat today would be if she took a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter without paying for them? In this case, is the stealing right or wrong? A good or bad choice? An appropriate or inappropriate action?

The point is that there are always competing forces in human lives and that part of what it means to be human is to make meaningful choices among them. If communication is a collaboratively constructed process, no one individual has complete control over its outcome. All of our choices are made within the context of our personal experience and are evaluated in relation to cultural norms and expectations. Standards for evaluation can differ from person to person, family to family, and culture to culture over time.

## 3. Culture: Culture and Communication Are Intertwined. Ethnicity, Gender, Age, Social Class, Sexual Orientation, and Other Cultural Features Always Affect Communication and Are Affected by It

When many people think about culture, they envision a group's customs, cooking, and clothing, but there's much more to it than that. In a very general sense, culture provides you with ways to make meaning. One way to talk about culture is to say that *culture means shared norms, values, and beliefs related to how people live and how people communicate*. These shared values, norms, and beliefs influence every part of people's lives.

Dating, for example, is one context in which the interaction of culture and communication can be observed. In some cultures, dating is a means to an end—a way to select a life partner, and whom you date is your business. In other cultures, it would be inappropriate to bring someone home to meet the folks, because "the folks" (parents, community members, or tribal leaders) will already have made arrangements for marriage.

When you think about culture this way, you'll realize that it involves much more than just national identity. People who share ways of living and speaking—who belong to "the same culture"—can be members of different ethnic groups. Even two members of the same family (a heterosexual brother and his lesbian sister) inhabit different cultures.

Especially today, with the increasing globalization of sports, music, media, business, education, and religion; with the explosion of international communication via the Internet and the Web; and with the growing recognition in education and business that diversity in organizations is a strength rather than a threat, culture is on almost everybody's minds. This is partly why I say that culture figures prominently in communication.

But there is a more basic reason: Culture becomes concrete in communication. What it *means* to belong to a culture is to communicate in certain ways—to

use certain expressions that members of other cultures don't use, to prefer certain kinds of meetings, to honor certain styles of speaking, to maintain certain distances, to touch in certain ways, and so on. This means that your culture is present in your communicating and other people's cultures are present in their communicating, too.

**Implication 3: Your Cultures—and Mine—Affect What I Say About Communication in This Book and How You Respond to It** Importantly for each author in this book—and for you as reader—*our* cultures are present in our communicating, too. I consider myself to be culturally Western, Anglo, middle class, late middle-aged, heterosexual, gendered, a parent, and a teacher-scholar. This means that my communication content and style in this book will embody these cultural features (and probably others I am not aware of). You'll get cultural information about some of the other authors in this book, and none about other authors. If you do *not* identify yourself culturally with an author, you may legitimately ask, "How are this person's ideas relevant to me? If culture and communication are so intertwined, what can I—an African-American, perhaps, or Latino, 20-year-old, gay or lesbian, engineering or chemistry student—learn from writings by this person?"

Enough, I hope, to keep you reading. This book offers some knowledge and skills about communication that are supported by evidence from a variety of cultures, and its authors speak from positions in cultures with fairly large memberships and fairly wide ranges of influence. If you are not a member of one or more of the cultures an author belongs to, this material can still be useful to you in at least two ways: (1) You can test generalizations against your experience in your own cultures to determine which apply and which don't, and (2) when an author's ideas don't apply in one or more of your cultures, you can use them to enhance your ability to communicate with people in the cultures the author inhabits.

For example, my first three claims about human communication are that humans live in worlds of meaning that are constructed in communicating, that choices embody ethical standards, and that culture figures prominently in all communication. I believe that there is ample evidence to demonstrate that these points are true about all people in all cultures, *not* just Western, Anglo, middle-class, late middle-aged, heterosexual, gendered, parent, and teacher-scholar cultures. Do you? I encourage you to test these generalizations against your own experience and to discuss the results with your instructor and classmates. On the other hand, as just one example, this book's readings about nonverbal communication may contain some generalizations about space or eye contact that don't ring true for one or more of your cultures. If so, you can combine your understanding of your own culture with what the author says about hers or his and then use this knowledge about space or eye contact in the author's culture to enhance your ability to communicate outside your own culture, with people in the culture the author inhabits.

And notice that you can do this without being co-opted. If you feel culturally different from some of the writers in this book, you don't have to give up

your distinctiveness to profit from what's here. You can operate like a global businessperson. People who have to serve customers or work with producers outside their own cultures routinely learn how to adapt to these other cultures, but from their own position of strength—as representatives of their cultures. These people want to do business in another culture, so their adaptation is based on that foundation; it doesn't mean that their values or morals are co-opted. Regardless of the culture you enter or the adaptations you may choose to make, you can do so from a comparable position of strength.

#### 4. Identities: Some of the Most Important Meanings People Collaboratively Create Are Identities; All Communicating Involves Negotiating Identities, or Selves

Communication theorist and teacher John Shotter emphasizes this point when he says that our "ways of being, our 'selves,' are produced in our ... ways of interrelating ourselves to each other—these are the terms in which we are socially accountable in our society—and these 'traditional' or 'basic' (dominant) ways of talking are productive of our 'traditional' or 'basic' psychological and social [identities]." In other words, who we are—our identities—is built in our communicating. People come to each encounter with an identifiable "self," built through past interactions, and *as we talk*, we adapt ourselves to fit the topic we're discussing and the people we're talking with, and we are changed by what happens to us as we communicate.

The way communication and identity are closely related became especially apparent in a conversation I had with a friend who was going through a painful divorce. "Mary Kay is not the person she used to be," Dale said. "Sometimes I hardly know her. I wish we could communicate and enjoy each other like we did when we were first married."

The times Dale was remembering were before Mary Kay was a mother, before she completed medical school, before she suffered through her residency in an urban hospital 2,000 miles from home, before she joined a prestigious medical clinic, and before she became a full-fledged practicing physician. They were also before Dale was a dad, before he started his import-export business, before he became active in his state professional association, and before he began attending church regularly. Dale was forgetting that Mary Kay could not possibly still be "the person she used to be." Neither could he. Both of them had experienced many relationships that changed them decisively. Mary Kay had been treated like a medical student—required to cram scientific information into her head and spout it on command—and like a first-year resident—forced to go without sleep, stand up to authoritarian doctors, and cope with hospital administrators. Now nurses obey her, many patients highly respect her for her skills, and prestigious doctors treat her like an equal. And she's treated as a mom by her son. Dale has also experienced many different relationships, and he's changed, too. He's treated as a boss by his employees and as "a respected American businessman" by his Japanese customers. Because of the contacts

both have experienced, each is a different person. And the process continues as both Mary Kay and Dale continue to be changed by their communication.

Obviously, these identity changes are limited. Most people don't change their gender, ethnicity, or family of origin. But some changes are inevitable over time, and others can happen in the short term. For example, a woman can communicate in ways that say she is more feminine—or more masculine—than her conversation partner and as a person with greater or less authority or power than her conversation partner has. The other person's responses will contribute to the identity as it's negotiated verbally and nonverbally.

Consider the difference, for example, between "Shut the door, stupid!" and "Please close the door." The command projects the identity of a superior speaking to a subordinate. On the other hand, the request identifies the speaker as an equal to the person being addressed. The person who's told to "Shut the door, stupid!" may silently comply, in which case he or she is reinforcing part of the identities of superior and subordinate. Or the person may respond, "Shut it yourself!" which is a negotiation move that says, in effect, "You're not my superior; we're equals."

**Implication 4: Identity Messages Are Always in Play** The point is that *identity negotiation, or the collaborative construction of selves, is going on whenever people communicate*. It definitely is not the *only* thing that's happening, but it's one of the very important processes, and it often gets overlooked. When it does, troubles usually result. By contrast, people who are aware of identity negotiation processes can communicate more effectively and successfully in many different situations. So whenever you communicate—on the telephone, via e-mail, face-to-face, in meetings, even in front of the television—part of what is happening is identity negotiation.

Communication content is important, too, and sometimes problems can be solved only when the parties involved have more or better information. Policies may be out of date, data may be incomplete, and people may have misread or misheard key instructions. In these cases, the people involved may need to complete, refine, or recalibrate the information they're working with.

But as I noted, effective communicators understand and manage what they're verbally and nonverbally "saying" about *who they are* to the people they're communicating with. Identities are communicated in many different ways. Topic choice and vocabulary are important. Grooming and dress also contribute to this process, as people offer definitions of themselves using nose rings and other body piercing, tatoos, starched white shirts or blouses, and conservative business suits. Tone of voice is similarly identity-defining. Some people foster misunderstanding by unknowingly sounding like they're skeptical, hostile, or bored, and other tones of voice can help their listeners feel genuinely appreciated and supported. Facial expressions also help define a person as attentive, careful, positive, or their opposites.

Especially when you're troubleshooting—or just trying to live through—a disagreement or conflict, it usually works best to start by understanding the

identities that are in play. Who might be getting defined as inattentive, insensitive, or incompetent? What communication moves make one person appear more important, trustworthy, moral, or thorough than the other? Does everybody involved feel able to influence the ways they're viewed by the others? Or are identities being treated as unchangeable? By the time you've worked through this book, you should have a wealth of ideas and practical skills for constructively managing how you define yourself and how others define you.

## 5. Conversation: The Most Influential Communication Events Are Conversations

If you had to identify one event that humans all over the world engage in characteristically—because they're humans—routinely, naturally, and almost constantly, what would it be? We all breathe, but so do other animals. We eat and drink, but not constantly, and again, other animals do too. The one activity that marks us as human and that occupies a large part of our personal and occupational lives is conversation, verbal and nonverbal exchange in real time, either face-to-face or mediated by some electronic medium (e.g., a computer or cell phone).

For a long time, people who studied communication and language tended to overlook this point. Language scholars focused on rules of grammar and syntax, dictionary definitions, and other features of writing, and speech research and teaching paid primary attention to public speaking and deliberation in law courts and legislatures. But in the last third of the 20th century, an increasing number of scholars and teachers have shown how written and formal kinds of communicating are derived from the most basic human activity, informal conversation. For example, two well-known psychologists from Stanford University began a report of their National Science Foundation–supported research with these words:

Conversation is the fundamental site of language use. For many people, even for whole societies, it is the only site, and it is the primary one for children acquiring language. From this perspective other arenas of language use—novels, newspapers, lectures, street signs, rituals—are derivative or secondary.<sup>8</sup>

Another respected scholar puts it more simply. "Conversation," he writes, "is sociological bedrock,"<sup>9</sup> the absolute foundation or base for everything humans do as social beings. This explains the sense of the title of one of communication theorist John Shotter's books, *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language*.<sup>10</sup> Shotter's book explains in detail how human realities get constructed in communication—my point 1—and emphasizes that the most characteristic form of this communication is *conversation*.

**Implication 5: The Most Ordinary Communication Events Are the Most Significant** The reason I highlight this idea as one of the six main points about human communication is that it justifies paying close attention to something

common and ordinary. The fact that humans engage in conversation so constantly, and so often almost without thinking, is part of what makes the process so important. As organizational theorist and trainer Peter Senge puts it, effective conversation is “the single greatest learning tool in your organization—more important than computers or sophisticated research.”<sup>11</sup> Whether in a living group, a family-run shop, a small work team, or a multinational corporation, the real organizational structure and rules—as contrasted with what’s on the organizational chart—get defined in the subtleties of verbal and nonverbal conversation. (Susan Scott makes this point later in this chapter.) Superior and subordinate status get negotiated in face-to-face contacts. Key decisions are heavily influenced by brief informal contacts in the bathrooms and halls as much as they are by formal presentations in meetings. And when the organization needs to change and there are feelings about rights or two worthwhile principles in conflict, the only realistic options are some form of authoritarianism or some form of problem-solving conversation. Similarly, conversation is the primary way families have of making decisions and negotiating differences. And children become effective participants in play groups, classrooms, sports teams, and their own families by learning how to converse well.

This means that one very important way to improve your communication competence is to pay close attention to the most common and everyday kind of communicating—conversation. When you do, you’ll discover that you already have a great deal of experience with many of the concepts and skills this book discusses. This means that you have a solid foundation to build on. Even if you don’t believe you’re very good at conversation, you’ve done it often and well enough, and it’s going on around you so much, that you can build on the experiences you have. One way is with point 6.

### 6. Nexting: The Most Important Single Communication Skill Is “Nexting”

*Nexting* is a strange term, I admit. But it’s the best one I’ve come up with for this skill. If, as you read this section, you come up with a better one, please let me know. You can email me at [jstewart@dbq.edu](mailto:jstewart@dbq.edu).

By “*nexting*” I mean doing something helpful next, responding fruitfully to what’s just happened, taking an additional step in the communication process. If you’ve grasped how I’ve described communication so far, this is the most important single skill you can build on this understanding. Here’s why:

Since you realize that communication is complex, continuous, and collaborative, you’ll always recognize that, no matter what’s happened before and no matter how bad things currently look, you always have the option to try a *next* step. No matter how many times the same insult has been repeated, the next response can be creative rather than retaliatory. No matter how long the parties have not been speaking to each other, the next time they meet, one of them could speak. No matter how ingrained and toxic the pattern is that two groups are caught in, the next move one side makes could be positive. No matter how

much you feel “thrown” by what the other person just said and did, if you give yourself a little time to regroup, you can make a next move that could help get the relationship back on track. No matter how little power the system gives you, your next communication choice can maximize the power you have. Even when it is very difficult not to strike back, your next comment could conceivably be helpful rather than abusive.

When you understand that communication is continuous and collaborative, you’ll recognize the potential value of what you do next. Why? Because since no one person determines all the outcomes of a communication event, you can help determine some outcomes, even if you feel almost powerless. Since no one person is 100 percent to blame or at fault, and all parties share response-ability, your next contribution can affect what’s happening. Since all communication is collaborative—remember, even prizefighters are co-labor-ating—your next communication move can make a change in the situation, or at least keep the conversation going.

**Implication 6: Whenever You Face a Communication Challenge or Problem, the Most Useful Question You Can Ask Yourself Is, “What Can I Help to Happen Next?”** You can apply the skill of nexting by remembering that no human system is ever completely determined or cast in stone. Regardless of how well or badly things are going between you and someone else, remember that what you do next will help maintain or destroy this quality. It almost goes without saying that in some cases you may not *want* to try to improve a bad situation or to maintain a good one. You may have tried to make positive contributions and have been continually rebuffed, and you may be out of patience, resources, or caring. You may in this particular case decide not to make a positive, supportive, or conciliatory move. You may also decide to let silence remain, to keep your distance, or to let the hostility fester. But if you understand the world-constructing nature of human communication, you can understand these options for what they are—*responses*, choices, decisions about what you are going to do *next*. They have their benefits and their consequences, just as other responses would.

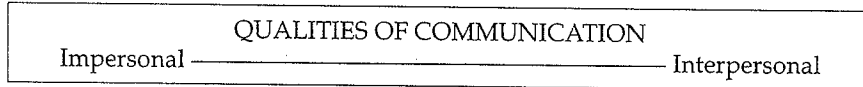
To put it simply, people who understand communication to be the kind of process I’ve outlined so far are not generally thrown off balance by communication difficulties. They understand that the most important thing to consider is what they are going to do *next*.

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATING

As I said at the start of this chapter, interpersonal communication is a subset of communication in general. This means that collaboration, choices, culture, identities, conversation, and nexting are all parts of interpersonal communicating, too. The kind of communication I’m calling “interpersonal” doesn’t happen all the time, but it can take place in families, between friends, during an argument, in business situations, and in the classroom. It can also happen

on the telephone, online, among jurors, at a party, across a bargaining table, and even during public speeches or presentations. The main characteristic of interpersonal communication is that the people involved are contacting each other *as persons*. This might sound pretty simple, but again, there's a little more to it than you might think.

For one thing, as you and I move through our daily family, work, social, and school lives, we tend to relate with others in two different ways. Sometimes we treat others and are treated by them *impersonally* as role-fillers (bank teller, receptionist, employer, bus driver, etc.). And sometimes we connect with others *personally*, as a unique individual (not just role-filler or cultural representative). I don't mean that there are sharp divisions; sometimes we move back and forth between impersonal and interpersonal contact. But these two terms can anchor a sliding scale or continuum that models the qualities or kinds of communication that people experience.



The left side of the continuum, the impersonal side, is characterized by communication that is based on social roles and exchanges that minimize the presence of the communicators' personal identities. Impersonal communication is the label I use to describe your typical experiences at the bank, convenience store, and fast-food restaurant, and in front of the television. In these situations, people usually connect in ways that emphasize their social roles—teller/customer, buyer/seller, server/diner, and so on. Even though human beings are obviously involved, they all function pretty much like interchangeable parts of an automobile or computer. So long as the teller, buyer, or server knows his or her job (social role), and so long as the customer, seller, or diner remains in his or her role, it doesn't matter much who they are as individuals. I call this quality of communication *impersonal* because it's the most generic kind of human contact. There is human association but little or no close human contact.

Often, of course, this is exactly the best kind of communicating to have. For one thing, it's efficient. Nobody wants to wait in line while the Burger King cashier has a personal chat with each customer. It's also often the most appropriate kind of communicating. We don't ordinarily approach bank tellers, ticket sellers, or driver's license clerks expecting or wanting to have a deep conversation.

However, not all impersonal communicating takes place with people we hardly know. It is not unusual to engage in efficient, issue-centered communication with people we know well and care about. We also engage in generic greeting rituals with our best friends and family members as well as strangers. It's not uncommon to hear parents involve role-based communication patterns with their children (e.g., "Because I'm the mom, that's why!"). The important point is that impersonal communicating is a common, normal, useful, and often very appropriate way of relating.

But some of almost every day's communicating also fits near the right-hand end of the scale. During a committee meeting or team activity, you may contact another person as a unique individual, and you may get treated that way by him or her. The same kind of communicating can happen in your conversations with a dating partner, a parent, a sibling, your roommate, co-workers, or close friends.

No one's communication life can be packaged into neat boxes; that's why the model is a sliding scale. At one moment you may be contacting someone impersonally, and at the next moment your communication may become interpersonal. But what I've said so far clarifies what I mean when I define interpersonal communication, the main topic of this book, as *the type or kind of communication that happens when the people involved talk and listen in ways that maximize the presence of the personal*.

Notice that this definition is not based on the number of people involved or whether they are in the same place. I believe that it is possible to communicate interpersonally in groups and even through phone lines or email. When communication emphasizes the persons involved rather than just their roles or stereotypical characteristics, interpersonal communication is happening.

### Features of the Personal

So what do I mean by "the personal"? Many philosophers, anthropologists, and communication scholars have defined what it means to be a person and how persons differ from other kinds of animals. One widely recognized description was created by a philosopher of communication named Martin Buber. (Buber was born in 1878; lived in Austria, Germany, and Israel; visited the United States a couple of times; and died in 1965.) He suggested that there are five qualities, or characteristics, that distinguish persons across many—though perhaps not all—cultures: uniqueness, measurability, responsiveness, reflectiveness, and addressability.<sup>12</sup> These five define what I mean by "the personal," and I will use the five and their opposites to distinguish *impersonal* from *interpersonal* communicating.

**Unique** Uniqueness means noninterchangeability. We, as persons, can be treated as if we were interchangeable parts, but each of us can also be thought of as unique in a couple of ways, genetically and experientially. The main reason that genetic cloning experiments are controversial is that they threaten this quality. Unless they are cloned or are identical twins, the probability that two persons would have the same genetic materials is 1 in 10 to the ten-thousandth power. That's less than one chance in a billion trillion!

But cloning wouldn't really threaten uniqueness, because even when persons have the same biological raw material, each experiences the world differently. For example, recall identical twins you've known. Both twins might see the same film in the same theater on the same night at the same time, sitting next to each other. Both might leave the theater at the same time and say exactly the

same words about it: "I liked that film." At a superficial level, someone might suggest that the experiences of the two are, in this situation, interchangeable. But additional talk will show that they aren't. Did both twins like the film for the same reasons? Did they recall the same experiences as they interpreted the film? Will the film have the same effect on both of them? Will both remember the same things about it? If you asked the twins these questions, you'd get different answers, and you'd discover what you probably knew before you began the process: Each human is unique.

When people are communicating with each other impersonally, they're overlooking most of this uniqueness and focusing on the similarities among all those who play a given social role. All of us naturally and constantly fill many different roles—student, daughter or son, sibling, employee, and so on. And role relationships are an inescapable part of communicating. But the sliding scale emphasizes that people can move from impersonal communication to interpersonal contact.

So the first feature that distinguishes *persons* is experiential and, in most cases, genetic uniqueness. Some cultures downplay this feature, but most Western cultures emphasize it. The more present this feature is in your communicating, the farther your communication is toward the right-hand side of the impersonal-interpersonal continuum.

**Unmeasurable** Objects are measurable; they fit within boundaries. An event is of a certain duration; it lasts a measurable amount of time. Even extremely complex objects, such as sophisticated supercomputers, 70-story buildings, and space vehicles, can be completely described in space-and-time terms. This is what blueprints do. They record all the measurements necessary to re-create the object—length, height, width, mass, specific gravity, amperage, voltage, velocity, circumference, hardness, ductility, malleability, conductivity, and so on. Although it's difficult to measure some things directly—the temperature of a kiss, the velocity of a photon, the duration of an explosion—no object or event has any parts that are unmeasurable, in theory at least.

It's different with persons. Even if your physician accurately identifies your height, weight, temperature, blood pressure, serum cholesterol level, hemoglobin count, and all your other data right down to the electric potential in your seventh cranial nerve, the doctor still will not have exhaustively accounted for the person you are, because there are parts of you that can't be measured. Many scientists, social scientists, philosophers, and theologians have made this point. Some cognitive scientists, for example, include in their model of the person components they call "schematas," or "cognitive patterns" that don't have any space-and-time (measurable) existence, but that can be inferred from observations of behavior. Others call the unmeasurable elements of a person the "human spirit," "psyche," or "soul." But whatever you call it, it's there.

Emotions or feelings are the clearest observable evidence of this unmeasurable part. Although instruments can measure things related to feelings—brain waves, sweaty palms, heart rate, paper-and-pencil responses—what the

measurements record is a long way from the feelings themselves. "Pulse 110, respiration 72, Likert rating 5.39, palmar conductivity 0.036 ohms" may be accurate, but it doesn't quite capture what's going on inside when you encounter somebody you can't stand or greet somebody you love.

One other thing: These emotions or feelings are *always* a part of what we are experiencing. Psychologists and educators agree that it's unrealistic to try to separate the intellectual or objective aspect of a person or a subject matter from the affective or emotional parts. This is because humans are always thinking *and* feeling. As one writer puts it, "It should be apparent that there is no intellectual learning without some sort of feeling and there are no feelings without the mind's somehow being involved."<sup>13</sup>

Even though feelings are always present, some communication acknowledges them and some communication doesn't. The cashier who's dedicated to her social role will greet people with a smile and wish them a "nice day" even if she feels lousy. Servers in a restaurant are taught not to bring their feelings to work. Two persons who are in a minority may share similar feelings of isolation or exclusion, but they may or may not talk about them. On the other hand, when people are communicating interpersonally, some of their feelings are in play. This does not mean that you have to wear your heart on your sleeve to communicate interpersonally. It just means that when people are making interpersonal contact, some feelings are appropriately acknowledged and shared.

**Responsive** Humans are thoroughly and uniquely responsive beings. Objects can only react; they cannot respond. They cannot choose what to do next. Automatic pilots, photoelectric switches, personal and industrial robots, thermostats, and computers can sometimes seem to operate on their own or turn themselves off and on, but they too are dependent on actions initiated outside them. The computers and robots have to be programmed, the thermostat reacts to temperature, which reacts to the sun's rays, which are affected by the earth's rotation, and so on. Similarly, a ball can go only where it's kicked, and if you were good enough at physics calculations, you could figure out how far and where it would go, on the basis of weight, velocity, aerodynamics, the shape of your shoe, atmospheric conditions, and so on.

But what if you were to kick a person? It's an entirely different kind of activity, and you cannot accurately predict what will happen. The reason you can't is that when persons are involved, the outcome depends on *response*, not simply *reaction*. If you tap my knee, you may cause a reflex jerk, but the feelings that occur are not completely predictable, and the behavior or actions that accompany my reflex may be anything from giggles to a slap in the face.

The range of responses is limited, of course. We can't instantly change sex, become three years younger, or memorize the contents of Wikipedia. But we can decide whether to use a conventional word or an obscene one; we can choose how to prioritize our time commitments; and, as will be discussed in later chapters, choice is even a part of the feelings we experience.

In fact, the more you realize your freedom and power to respond rather than simply react, the more of a person you can be. Sometimes it's easy to get out of touch with this freedom and power. You feel like saying, "I *had* to shout back; he was making me look silly!" or "I just *couldn't* say anything!" These statements make it sound like you don't have any choice, like what you do is completely *caused* by what another person does. But as the discussion of fault and blame noted, even when circumstances are exerting pressure, persons still have some freedom and power to choose how to respond. It may mean resisting a culturally rooted preference or breaking some well-established habit patterns, and it may take lots of practice, but it's possible to become aware of your responses and, when you want to, to change them. The reason it's important to learn this skill is that when you believe you're just reacting, you've lost touch with part of what it means to be a person. So, all communication involves choices because persons are responsive, and the more you remember and act on this feature, the more interpersonal your communicating can become.

**Reflective** A fourth distinguishing characteristic is that persons are reflective. Being reflective means not only that we are aware of what's around us but also that we can be aware of our awareness. As one author puts it, "No matter how much of yourself you are able to objectify and examine, the quintessential, living part of yourself will always elude you, i.e., the part of you that is conducting the examination,"<sup>14</sup> the reflective part. Wrenches, rocks, and rowboats aren't aware at all. Dogs, cats, armadillos, and giraffes are all aware of their environments, but we don't have any evidence that they are aware of their awareness. So far as we know, only humans compose and save histories of their lives, elaborately bury their dead, explore their extrasensory powers, question the meaning of life, and speculate about the past and future. And only humans are aware that we do all these things.

Reflection is not a process that affects only philosophers and people who know that they don't have long to live. Healthy, "ordinary" people reflect, too. I wonder from time to time whether I'm spending my work time wisely and whether I'm making the right parenting decisions. Sometimes you probably wonder what you'll be doing five years from now. Before you make an important decision, you ask questions of yourself and others about priorities and probable consequences. On clear days, you may notice the beauty of the landscape around you and reflect on how fortunate you are to live where you do. Like all persons, you ask questions and reflect.

When people ignore the fact that persons are reflective, their communication usually shows it. For example, you may stick with superficial topics—the weather, recent news items, gossip. On the other hand, when you're aware of your own and others' reflectiveness, you can respond to more of what's going on as you communicate. Questions can be a clear indicator that a person is reflecting. Often people who express their opinions with absolute certainty have forgotten to reflect, to ask what they might be unsure of and what they might not have thought about. But the reflective person will often explicitly express

appropriate reservations and qualifications—"I think this is the right thing to do, but I'm not absolutely sure," or "I know I don't want to lie to him, but I'm not sure how or when to tell him."

**Addressable** Beings who are addressable can recognize when they are addressed, that is, when they are called or spoken to in language, and can also respond in language. Addressability is what makes the difference between talking *to* and talking *with*. Neither baseball bats nor dogs and cats are addressable, because you can talk to them, but not with them. You can call them, curse them, scold them, and praise them, but you cannot carry on a mutual conversation, even with an "almost human" pet.

One student described what addressability meant to her by recounting her experience as a child with her imaginary playmate, Sharla. Mary said that Sharla went everywhere with her and was always dressed appropriately. Sharla was also (in Mary's mind) always sympathetic to what Mary was doing and feeling. Mary would talk *to* Sharla constantly, telling her how she felt, complaining about her parents and older sister, and sometimes making elaborate plans. Occasionally, Mary would talk *about* Sharla to her friends or her mother. But of course Sharla never responded out loud. She never talked back. Mary could talk *to* and *about* Sharla, but not *with* her. Sharla was not addressable; she wasn't a person.

Communication theorist John Shotter talks about this feature of human communication under the heading of "addressivity," which he defines as "the quality of being directed toward someone."<sup>15</sup> "Addressed" speech is directed or "aimed" speech, and one characteristic of persons is that they can recognize address and respond in kind. So, for example, as you sit in an audience of several hundred, the speaker can single you out for immediate contact: "Holly Tartar? Are you here? Your question is about job programs, and I want to try to answer it now." Or even more commonly and more directly, you may sit across from a friend and know from the friend's eyes, the touch of his hand, and his voice that he means *you*; he's *present* with you; you are being addressed.

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