

## INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

*...to communicate with someone is to effect some form of change in their store of experiences. This change may affect their level of perception, their way of seeing things, their information bank and even their pattern of behavior.*

*Francois Allaire*

We are truly living in the age of communication. Several times daily we hear or see references made to mass communication, family communication, interpersonal communication, husband-wife communication, parent-child communication, one-way communication, poor communication, and only occasionally to good/effective communication. Communication is all too frequently blamed when things do not go as someone desired them to—international tension, labor disputes, employer-employee relations, family breakdown, neighborhood disputes, and parent-child differences. It is simply the nature of the human condition, everyday life, that human communication is such that it is unavoidable. We simply cannot not communicate.

But what is human communication? The word communication comes from the Latin word, *communis*, which means common. Therefore, communication refers to the process of establishing a commonness with another person or group of persons. Communication is more than the mere exchange of words, glances or other symbols between two people. Communication is the giving and receiving of information. Interpersonal communication is a process whereby one person has a message that he/she wants to share with another person. He/she decides what it is that is to be shared, puts it into a format (language, gestures, symbols, or sound), thus creating the message, sends it in some situational context to a receiver, who receives it, decodes it, formulates a response and sends it back to the original sender.

These, then, are the basic parts of the interpersonal communication process:

- A sender: A person who sends a message.
- A message: The information sent (verbal or nonverbal).
- A receiver: The person who receives the message of the sender.
- Feedback: The response of the receiver to the message of the sender.

The necessary parts in the communication process are relatively simple, i.e., all that is required is two people interacting. Yet, the process—the parts working harmoniously together—can be most complex. Part of the complexity of communication can be accounted for by understanding and examining some of the factors that influence the elements of the process.

In other words, communication is complex because people are complex. As people interact in communication, i.e., send and receive messages, it should be understood that the factors which effect that process act as a sieve or screen through which their messages sent and received must pass. Some of the factors making up that "screen" are gender, age, culture, values, time orientation, maturity, character, temperament, perceptions, health, attitudes, reputation, language, education, mannerisms, belief systems, and the physical surroundings.

To recognize just how these factors influence communication, pause and think about age, for example. Does a toddler think or speak like a child of eight or ten? Does a 12-year-old communicate like a 16- or 17-year-old? Or, how about a 20-year-old and a 40-year-old; or, a 40-year-old and one 75? Would people whose ages are different likely have the same orientation to time, or values, or use language in a common manner? Do you perceive (see) a situation or an event the same way as your friend does, your child, your spouse? Does it make any difference whether you are a male or a

female? To make a more interesting analysis, combine several factors together. For example, given your experience, say you have a 45-year-old male, with conservative values, a limited education, and in poor health trying to communicate with a 16-year-old male, in excellent health, with a liberal value orientation and well-informed: one is Republican and one a Democrat.

These, and many other factors influence the interaction of the sender, the message, and the receiver. Some factors are more dominant than others; some we are aware of, others we are not. But, the point is that they are all influencing the communication process all of the time.

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*The way you move. . .is saying something. It's an unspoken method of communication. . .a form of expression. Along with the way you look. . .sound. . .smell. . .something in the way you move sets you apart in that very personal zone of space you occupy. It's part of your aura. . .an aspect of your being that has the power to attract or repel, depress or elate everyone you meet.*

*"Bodyspeak," Vogue*

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It has been stated earlier that as human beings we spend a sizable portion of our time communicating with others. It seems likely that many would feel that unless they are speaking, talking, with another person that they were not communicating. That simply is not the case. Communication takes place whenever we are in contact with another through any of our body senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste. Communication occurs both verbally as well as nonverbally. It may be unfortunate that far too much reliance is placed on verbal communication alone, and that we expect it to do so much for us. Verbal communication does have a marvelous ability to convey ideas, thoughts, descriptions, and meaning from one

person to another. There are, however, difficulties in sole reliance on the verbal exchange. For example, we learn that words themselves do not have meaning. Words have definitions, but people have meaning. We all attach our own particular experiential and emotional connotations to the words we use. Words are not always associated with similar experiences, emotions, and feeling on the part of the sender and receiver. Other difficulties encountered in verbal communication include the use of jargon, the use of cliches, specialized vocabularies, localisms, and technical language. Another specially troublesome aspect of verbal communication is the fact that words can be heard and understood faster than they can be spoken. The average person speaks at the rate of about 150 words per minute; but the average listener can hear approximately 600 words per minute. This leaves the listener with a lot of time to use in ways other than listening. With all of its annoyances, words serve us amazingly well.

Nonverbal communication is known or referred to by several names—body language, the silent languages, and the science of nonverbal communication is called kinesics.

Nonverbal communication is usually involuntary and provides a valid source of information about verbal communication as well as attitudes, emotions, and feelings—even more valid than those expressed verbally or symbolically. The nonverbal languages of interpersonal communication include body positions and movements—how one walks, carries the body, stands, sits and postures himself, how the face, eyes, and mouth are used, the gestures of arms and leg movements, etc.

How a person accommodates in, to, and uses space, time, color, sound, odor (scent), and symbols constitute other forms of nonverbal communication. The nervous habits or tics, the vocal grunts, groans, and intonations of voice, the pitch of the voice, the enunciations, and

emphases given certain words, and our written language are also part and parcel of our communication methods and skills.

The communication process can be interrupted or stopped at several points by many things. Stopped or blocked communication often results in negative consequences or outcomes, and frustrates positive, meaningful human relationships. Effective communication may be blocked by things such as:

- Uncontrolled emotions
- Poor listening habits
- Personal biases and prejudices
- Personal distortion of meaning
- Misunderstanding and/or misinterpretation of words used
- Faulty generalizations
- Body messages that don't fit the words used
- Unwillingness to consider the other person's point of view
- Violation of space
- Real or imagined offenses or hurt feelings
- Self-centeredness
- Jumping to conclusions
- Fear
- Lack of empathy
- Being overly critical, evaluative, and judgmental
- Failure to ask questions
- Talking down or patronizing

Recognition of habits, speech patterns, word usage, and other behaviors which block effective communication is a first step in eliminating them, and thus helping communication be more effective.

There are many things that one can do that will help the communication process be a meaningful and effective experience. Here are a few suggestions to improve communication:

- *Realize that meaningful communication does not automatically occur when two people talk to or at each other.*

- *Feedback is important.*

The idea of giving an appropriate response lets the sender know there is shared meaning.

- *Communication is symbolic.*

Messages sent to others are made up of the signs, symbols, and signals of our culture. We cannot communicate the feeling, the idea, the emotion, or the object itself, so we use symbols to stand for them.

- *Messages have consequences.*

Once the sender formulates a message and sends it, it becomes quite free of the sender. What it does is beyond the power of the sender to change.

- *Send "I" messages.*

Learn to and then practice sending "I" type messages. For example:

"I feel that. . ."

"I believe. . ."

"I understand. . ."

"I think. . ."

"I am. . ."

- *Be honest with self and others.*

The truth may be painful at times, but deception or half-truth destroys trust; and without trust human relationships break down.

- *Be responsible for your own feelings and ideas—don't blame others.*

"I feel proud when you get an 'A.'"

"I am happy when you smile at me."

"I feel hurt when you don't listen."

- *Respect the ideas and feelings of others.*

- *Try to understand others.*

Learn to deal with the differences and the likenesses of people. Try to build on the understandings of people rather than allow misconceptions to become barriers to good communication.

- *Recognize the many elements which go into communication.*
- *Every person is a unique individual.*  
No two people are the same.
- *Communication is both verbal and nonverbal.*  
Words, sounds, language, actions, gestures, touches, facial expressions, emotions, and silence do much to make up the mosaic of communication.
- *Communication contains both positive and negative expressions.*  
The emotions of anger, fear, jealousy, frustration, and hate result in the expression of negative feelings and actions. The emotions of joy, happiness, gratitude, love, and affection lead to the expression of positive feelings and actions. Both types of expressions may be difficult to handle.
- *Self-disclosure is also an element of communication.*  
We get to know the real person when he discloses himself to us. We also have to give of ourselves in order to make communication a two-way process.
- *Empathy.*  
Empathy is the ability to perceive the feelings and attitudes of others. It is attempting to understand how and why someone feels as they do. We can never “know just how someone feels” because we are not that person. We can try to understand how others feel by allowing that person to express their feelings. It is a willingness to try to understand, to be open to cues, and aware of messages that aren’t always put into words.
- *An exchange of ideas.*  
This involves both giving and receiving, and it may be anything from just chit-chatting to the sharing of ideas, concepts, feelings, and thoughts about the future.
- *Learn to listen.*  
Listen to hear not only what is said, but how and why it is said. Concentration is essential for good listening. If you are so busy thinking up a response, that you don’t hear what is being said, you are not communicating effectively. To listen, you must be willing to invest part of yourself, your time, and your energy. Allow the speaker a chance to finish his thought, digest what is said, and then respond based on what was said. A good listener exchanges his viewpoint, his ideas, his opinions, but he is concerned for the other person’s right to an opinion. Complete listening—*hearing and trying to understand what the other person is saying—is important.*
- *Learn to do away with distractions.*  
Try to avoid “fiddling” with things. Eliminate unnecessary noise, such as a television or radio. Get comfortable. Active listening is difficult, so make your surroundings as free from distractions as possible.
- *Look at each other.*  
Watch for the expression behind the words. Try to see if your words are being received as you intended. If you never look at your communication partner, how can you “see” what is being said or heard?
- *Clarify.*  
Is what you heard what you said? Ask questions. Rephrase. Say—“I am hearing you say. . .Is that what you mean?” Provide feedback; e.g., nod, smile, gesture, or ask questions. Let your face show how you are hearing what is said. The sender must see how his message is being received.
- *Be willing to communicate.*  
Effective communication requires a willingness to make the effort, and to invest a little of yourself in the process. It takes patience, hard work, concern, and practice.

Communication is a vital key to meaningful human relationships. It can serve as a bridge or a block to successful interpersonal relationships. Which way will it serve you?

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*We know that when any group with a particular set of values is cut off from communication with others, or cuts itself off, it tends to become more dogmatic, sterile, and unproductive in its thinking.*

*Robert Theobald*

The information presented here should help in understanding the complexity of a process that is largely taken for granted. An awareness of some of the factors that affect the communication process and their ever-changing variability should alert us to how easy it is to have communication difficulties or failures; and influence us to be more careful in our own efforts to communicate as well as more patient with the efforts of others.

**For Application and Further Insight**

- Remember a communication experience in which you had difficulty or failed because you had not established a common ground with your listener. What could you have done to prevent this?
- List some of the physical, cultural, and personal factors which interfere with your communication attempts with others:

Physical \_\_\_\_\_

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Cultural \_\_\_\_\_

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Personal \_\_\_\_\_

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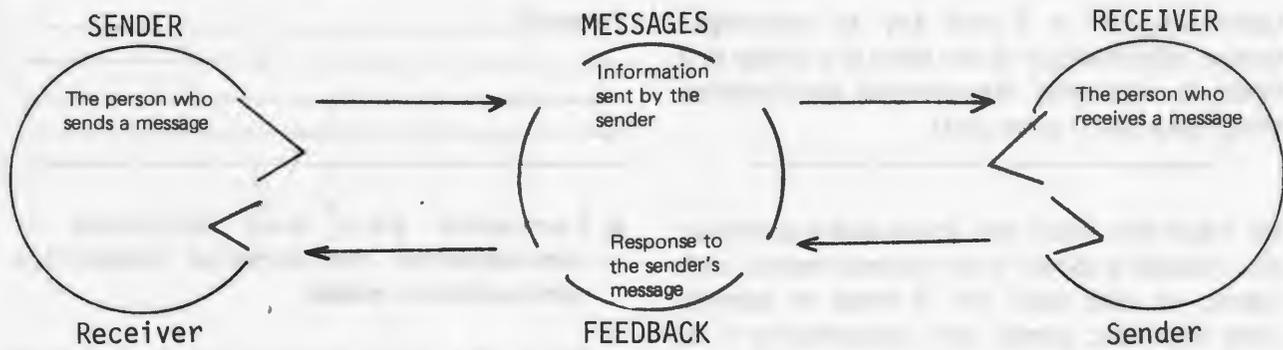
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- Formulate your own definition of communication, and construct (diagram) a communication model.
- Think of a recent personal incident in which someone failed to communicate what they intended. Analyze why it happened and how it could have been avoided.
- Obtain and complete one or both of these forms:
  - C-181, *A Self-Appraisal Communication Quiz*
  - C-182, *Interpersonal Communication Inventory*
 (Available from your county Extension agent.)

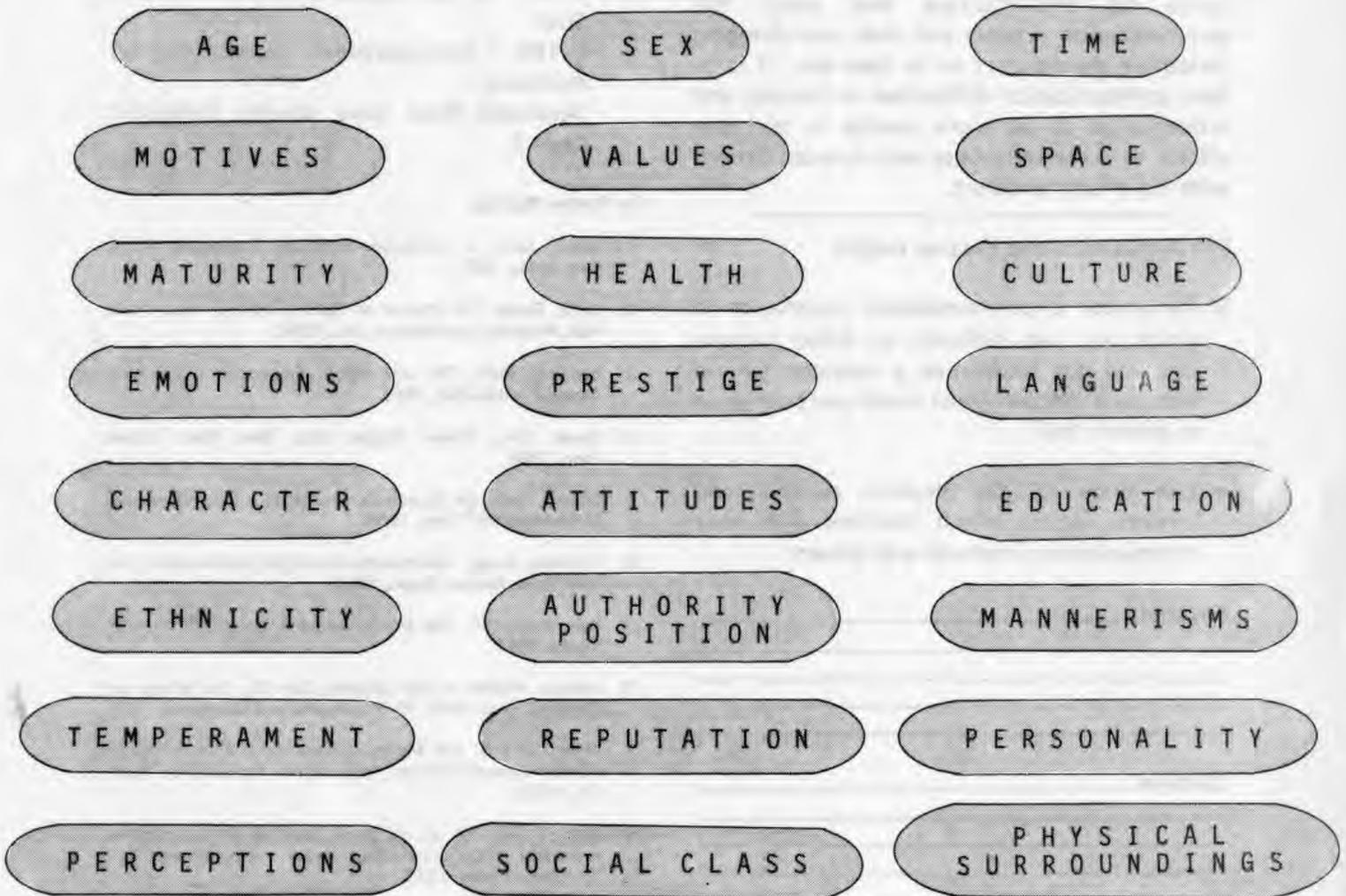
**For Further Reading**

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# COMPONENTS OF THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS



There are many conditions, factors, and situations that influence the interaction of the sender, the message and the receiver—some more intense than others, some we are aware of, others we are not, some are obvious, others concealed—and, they are all in operation all of the time. These factors are:



## Interpersonal Communication Process

The necessary parts in the communication process are at once simple and complex. Simple in that all that is required is two people interacting. Complex in that the individual is exceedingly complicated and everything that he/she is influenced by their style and manner of communicating, as well as does their environment, past and present. Communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. Whenever two people perceive each other, they both act as sender and receivers, and a message, whether spoken or not, has been transmitted. The resultant behavior of each demonstrates that the message was received and is the evidence of feedback. These, then, are the basic components of the interpersonal communication process: a sender—a person who sends a message; a message—the information sent, be it verbal or nonverbal; a receiver—the person who receives the stimulus (message) of the sender; and, the feedback—the response of the receiver to the message of the sender.

The complexity of the communication process becomes evident when one thoroughly examines the factors that affect the components of the

communication process. Add to this awareness, the recognition that everyone is uniquely different and never possesses a repertoire of experience, knowledge, or perceptions identical to any other individual, it is remarkable indeed that we communicate as well as we do.

We assume that our familiar senses give us a complete picture of our environment, but nothing could be further from the truth. We are stone-deaf and color-blind in a universe of impressions beyond the range of our senses. The world of a dog is a world of scent; that of a dolphin, a symphony of ultrasonic pulses as meaningful as sight. To be the bee, on a cloudy day, the diffuse sunlight carries a direction sign utterly beyond our powers of discrimination, for it can detect the plane of vibration of the light waves. The rattlesnake strikes in total darkness toward the infrared glow of its living prey—as our guided missiles have learned to do only in the last few years. There are blind fish in muddy rivers who probe their opaque universe with electric fields, the natural prototype of radar; and all fish have a curious organ, the lateral line, running along their bodies to detect vibrations and pressure changes in the water around them.

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*Could we interpret such sense impressions, even if they were fed into our brains? Undoubtedly yes, but only after a great deal of training. We have to learn to use all our own senses. . .*

Arthur C. Clarke  
*Profiles of the Future, 1967*

*The limits of our language mean the limits of our world. A new world is the beginning of a new language. A new language is the seed of a new world.*

*"Pre-Experiencing Alternative Futures"*  
*Technology III, December 12, 1969*

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Kenneth E. Barber, Ph.D., Extension Sociologist, Cooperative Extension Service, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

*and communication facilities which belong to it."*

Gene Youngblood  
*Expanded Cinema, 1970*

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Francois Allaire  
*Canadian Industries Limited Oval Spring, 1970*

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Francois Aitane  
Canadian Industries Limited (Owl)  
Spring, 1980

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