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Communication Pathways

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Abstract

Description from the publisher's website: From the authors of *The Speaker* and *The Speaker's Primer* comes an innovative new textbook that covers communication curriculum in an approachable way. Communication Pathways introduces a modern approach to the survey course, with concise chapters that emphasize communication theory. The authors organize content around a communication-centric theme: dialogue. A full chapter devoted to dialogic communication unpacks the concept for students; the authors further incorporate and explicate dialogic communication as it applies to subsequent chapter concepts. This theme is unique to the text and is a central element of what the authors aim to accomplish: to create competent communicators who can advocate ideas civilly, explain complicated subjects, and disagree without being disagreeable in a variety of interactive settings.

- Dialogic communication theme unifies survey communication course content to foster student engagement and concept application
- Concise presentation offers theory-based learning that leaves room for instructor innovation
- "Mediated Moments" feature illustrates key concepts from chapters through contemporary, relatable examples
- "Dialing Diversity" boxes engage age, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity

Disciplines

Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Organizational Communication | Other Communication | Public Relations and Advertising | Social Influence and Political Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

Comments

Chapter 1, "The Basics of Communication," is provided for download with the permission of the publisher. To order the entire volume, see the publisher's website.

Chapter 1

The Basics of Communication

As the world around us becomes increasingly accessible, communication skills become more important than ever. Whether we are speaking with family over dinner, going out on a first date, working with a sales team to market a product, delivering a graduation address, or using technology to interact with friends across long distances, the one constant in all our days is communication. It is important to develop good communication skills so that we maximize our ability to be successful in all our endeavors with other people.

People often believe they know how to communicate well and that the same style or mode of communication works in every scenario. With our increasingly complex and digital world, this is simply not the case. Communication skills, like any other skill, require practice and continual development. In this chapter, we introduce you to the basic principles of communicating in any context so that as we progress through the book you begin to see how these principles work to inform how we adapt our communication in a variety of situations. We will begin with briefly describing the various reasons why and how we communicate in today's global world. We will then discuss some common myths about communication and what people erroneously believe it can do. Finally, we will explain models for when communication works and discuss what makes a person a competent communicator.

Why We Communicate

A quick answer to why we communicate could very well be "to get something done"; however, as we will see in this section of the chapter, there are more reasons that drive us to interact with others than simply accomplishing tasks. In fact, there are five fundamental motives that drive our need to communicate with others. These needs all feed into some level of noted psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1.1).[1] His model shows that people first need to fill physiological needs, such as food and sleep, before then seeking safety for themselves and their family. Once these two needs are met, they move on to filling their needs to love and to belong to a group, which in turn allow them to seek out a way to fill their needs for self-esteem and confidence. Finally, they seek to fill their moral needs through what Maslow calls self-actualization. Maslow's hierarchy demonstrates that for communication to be successful and fulfilling, it needs to be driven by a purpose.

FIGURE 1.1   **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

Physical Needs

Communication enhances our physical and mental health. This fact is what undergirds such programs as cancer support groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, and even suicide help lines. People can feel better when they talk to other people, because in doing so they feel connected to the world around them. For example, according to the American Cancer Society, research indicates that participation in support groups can help reduce stress, tension, and fatigue, while also potentially helping patients achieve greater tolerance for the grueling treatment they are undergoing.[2]

The benefits of communication on a person's health are rooted in the fact that we are social beings. Sometimes it is as if we cannot survive without social contact, something German Emperor Frederick II proved in a grossly unethical experiment in the thirteenth century. In an effort to determine what language children would speak without being exposed to any language, he took 50 newborns and had nurses feed and clean them, but not

speak or otherwise hold them. All of the infants eventually died.[3] In more current and less dangerous research, scholars have shown how important human contact, especially touch, is to newborns. In fact, more recent work has demonstrated that talking to babies, even at very early ages, helps them develop language skills.[4] Contact and communication are clearly directly related to health for children and adults, and help people fill their physiological and safety needs.

Instrumental and Task Needs

 Despite the health benefits provided by interacting with others, communication also often results in the fulfillment of practical needs. For example, without communication we could not exchange phone numbers, relay sales figures, share a diagnosis with a patient, or even build a bridge.

From ordering dinner, to calling emergency services, we use communication to complete important tasks that allow us to remain safe and even find food. The role communication plays in completing everyday tasks is as important as the benefits it accords our health and well-being. Without communication, we most assuredly would not be able to survive, but since we have survived, we can look to the other needs communication fills in our lives.

Relational Needs

In addition to personal health and safety, we need companionship with others. This companionship helps us receive and give affection to others, as well as find ways to relax and escape from the stresses of life. These are things made possible through connection to other people, which would not be possible without communication. Communication is how we establish and maintain relationships with other people.

In today's global, digital world, there are myriad ways in which we can create relationships with others. There are the traditional avenues, such as face-to-face communication with our neighbors, classmates, and colleagues, and we can also maintain relationships at a distance, thanks to the telephone, video chat programs like Skype and FaceTime, and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, just to name a few. Furthermore, we can create relationships with people we have never met in person using these same digital media.

Despite the abundance of communication tools, sometimes the more connected we are, the less connected to other people we feel. This is precisely the worry that has been raised by several scholars and cultural experts. For example, MIT professor, Sherry Turkle, delivered a *TEDx* Talk entitled, "The Innovation of Loneliness," where she argued our increased use and reliance on social media and electronic communication has created an atmosphere where we feel more isolated from each other.[5] The medium of the computer has created a barrier preventing us from truly learning how to relate with other people. Nevertheless, communication helps us fulfill our need to develop and maintain relationships with others, despite the challenges some forms of communication may present in doing so.

Identity Needs

Our conversations with others help shape how we see ourselves. The resulting communication thus provides us with how others understand us, and also provides us the language to define how we present ourselves to other people. Our identities are always in a state of flux, changing based on how new people see us, and how we choose to interact with them. This constant feedback allows us to adapt our self-images based on the different contexts in which we find ourselves.

For example, you define yourself differently and communicate differently with your parents than you do with your friends from school. In turn, you define yourself differently and speak differently with your college friends than you do with your friends from high school.

MEDIATED MOMENTS

The Artist Formerly Known As Prince

One of the more popular and successful musicians in recent years, Prince, changed his name to a symbol in 1993 during a dispute with his record label, Warner Bros. Appearing before the press with the word "slave" written on his face, Prince declared his new "name" and explained its meaning:

> The first step I have taken toward the ultimate goal of emancipation from the chains that bind me to Warner Bros. was to change my name from Prince to the Love Symbol [♀]. Prince is the name that my mother gave me at birth. Warner Bros. took the name, trademarked it, and used it as the main marketing tool to promote all of the music that I wrote. The company owns the name Prince and all related music marketed under Prince. I became merely a pawn used to produce more money for Warner Bros...

> I was born Prince and did not want to adopt another conventional name. The only acceptable replacement for my name, and my identity, was the Love Symbol, a symbol with no pronunciation, that is a representation of me and what my music is about. This symbol is present in my work over the years; it is a concept that has evolved from my frustration; it is who I am. It is my name.

In this statement, Prince publicly announced the symbol he would be referred to as from that point on. He tied it to his sense of self and what he believed he represented. Since people could not verbalize the symbol, they referred to him as "The artist formerly known as Prince." This action by the famous artist shows how close the tie is between communication and our identity, and it depicts how communication can work to fulfill those needs.

Our identities shift based on what we let people see in us, what we choose to hide, and even what we do not know we are sharing or presenting to others. Later, in Chapter 3, we will explore self-esteem in greater detail, but for now it is enough to say we use communication to construct our self-image.

Spiritual Needs

In 2012, 77 percent of Americans still claimed a Christian label,[6] and even those who do not adhere to a faith still grapple with questions like "what is the meaning of life?" and "why are we here?" Spirituality does not mean religion; rather it refers to deep feelings and beliefs about the values, purposes, and meaning of human existence. Spirituality is not synonymous with religion, but rather religion is one form of expression of spirituality. As individuals, regardless of our faiths, we use communication to satisfy our longing for answers regarding these profound questions that cannot be directly answered. Some use prayer, while others employ meditation or read philosophy.

For those who use prayer, there is an even deeper question related to the spiritual needs fulfilled by communication. Communication scholar, Quentin Schultz, refers to this question as the "God Problem,"[7] wherein some people may use prayer to communicate to God, but how do we know he answers us? How does God actually speak, himself? These are profound questions about communication rooted in its ability to help us seek answers to and fulfill our spiritual needs. Intrapersonal communication, or communication with oneself, is also a vital part of other forms of spiritual communication that employ meditation and self-reflective practices.

Understanding How We Communicate

Communication takes many different forms. In this section of the chapter, we will dissect communication to better understand how messages are constructed and how they are delivered. We will first discuss the nature of symbols and their relationship to our thoughts, and then we will discuss three models of communication that explain how messages travel (and sometimes don't) between people in virtually any situation. As we will explain, communication does not function in one way, as there are several paths through which messages can travel.

The Building Blocks of Communication

Many disciplines break down their subject matter into things called **units of analysis**, or the "what" that the researcher is trying to understand or study. Biologists use cells, chemists use molecules, mathematicians use numbers, and communication scholars use symbols. Symbols are not just words; they can take many forms. One of the simplest ways to understand the study of symbols in all their forms is provided by C. K. Ogden and I.A. Richards in their book, *The Making of Meaning*.[8]

Ogden and Richards proposed that meaning is in people, not words. This proposal can also be extended to the use of other symbols. People give words and other

Unit of analysis
the item that the researcher is trying to understand or study

symbols meaning through interpretation, because words and symbols mean nothing until we give them their essence. Ogden and Richards illustrated how the process of interpretation works. There are three parts of a semantic triangle: the referent, the symbol, and the thought. The symbol is a representation, such as a word or image. A referent is an actual object that you are trying to communicate to another person. We use thought to connect the symbol to the referent. It is in our minds, through thought, that we connect the symbol and the referent. Once this relationship has been established, we can use the symbol (such as the word "table") to represent the thing (an actual table) when we are communicating with others who share our same symbol system (our language: English, Latin, Spanish, Arabic, etc.). This allows us to share meaning with other people, even if the things that we are communicating about are not actually present. See Figure 1.2 for an illustration.
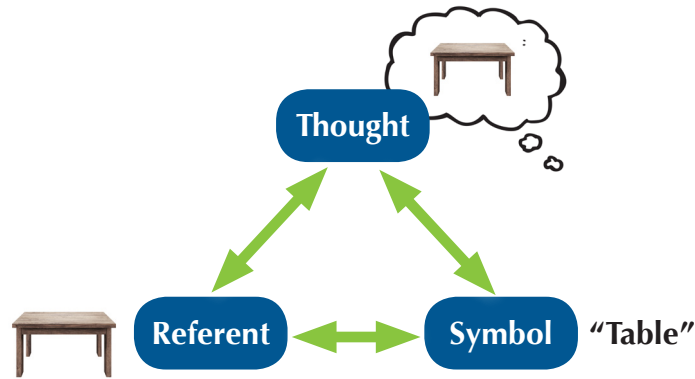

FIGURE 1.2   Semantic Triangle

As you can see, Ogden and Richards provided a clear way to analyze communication by treating symbols as the units of analysis. We do not, however, communicate using just a symbol, but rather by using symbol systems. Language is a type of symbol system, as are traffic signs, and even the Periodic Table of Elements. These systems allow people to communicate with each other, but the processes by which we send messages using symbols systems is more complex than this.

Models of the Communication Process

There are three primary models used to explain the communication process, and each contains the same basic elements. The process begins with a sender **encoding**, or creating, a message. They then send the message through a **channel,** or pathway through which the symbols travel to a receiver or receivers. Some examples of channels are text messages, television, radio, phone, email, and even your own voice. When travelling through the channel, the message invariably encounters **noise**, or anything that interferes with the receiver's ability to properly receive the message. For some examples of types of noise our messages typically encounter, see Table 1.1. On the other end of the channel is the receiver, who **decodes,** or interprets, the symbols within the message, thus giving them meaning.

Encoding
the process of creating a message using symbols

Channel
pathway through which the symbols travel

Noise
anything that interferes with the receiver's ability to properly receive the message

Decoding
the process of interpreting the symbols within a message

TABLE 1.1   Types of Noise

Physical Noise	Psychological Noise
Other sounds (people talking, air conditioner, shuffling papers, etc.)	Preoccupation with other thoughts
Visual barriers	Emotional reaction to the topic
Poor volume and projects	Prejudice or ill will toward the speaker
Distractions in the room	Unwillingness to listen
Hunger, tiredness, and other bodily limitations	Resistance to the message

These basic components serve as the foundation for each of the three models of the communication process we will now explore in further detail.

Action model of communication. The action model of communication goes by two other names: the Shannon-Weaver model, and the linear model. The first of these alternate names represents the scholars responsible for the model's development, and the latter name reflects how the model works, as you will see. In the action model, communication is understood as a one-way process, in which the sender sends a message to a receiver, who decodes it. According to this model, the process stops there, as represented in Figure 1.3, but over time communication scholars recognized the process of creating and communicating meaning is not so linear.
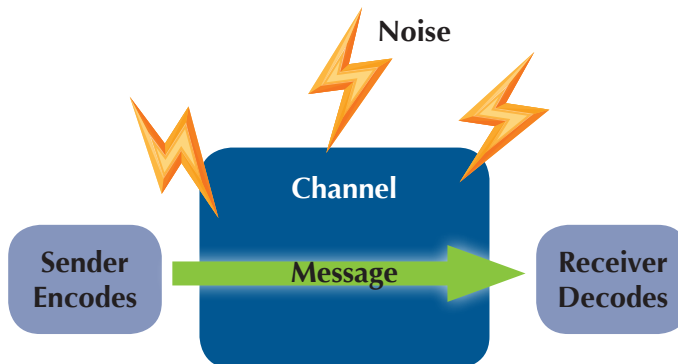
FIGURE 1.3   Action Model of Communication

Interaction model of communication. The interaction model expands the action model, using all the same elements, but adding two more in order to show communication as a two-way process instead of a linear one-way process as shown in Figure 1.3. The first of the added elements to the model is **feedback**, or the various verbal and nonverbal responses to the message by the receiver. In the interaction model, feedback takes place after the receiver decodes the sender's message. The second added component is **context,** or the physical, emotional, and psychological environment in which the communication event takes place. When we communicate, we take the context into consideration when it comes to the words we use, the way we act, dress, and respond, and so the interaction model, Figure 1.4 on the following page, acknowledges this aspect of the communication process. Despite these additions, the

Feedback
the various verbal and nonverbal responses to the message by the receiver

Context
the physical, emotional, and psychological environment in which the communication event takes place

two-way nature of the interaction model still does not completely capture the nature of the communication process, and so scholars developed a third, more complete model.
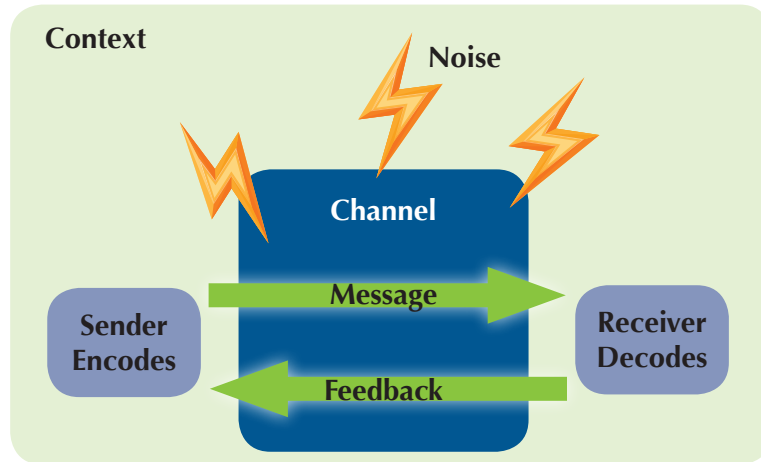
FIGURE 1.4   Interaction Model of Communication

Transactional model of communication. The transactional model updates both the action and interaction models of communication in one key way. The model does not differentiate between the sender and the receiver, seeing both parties as sender and receiver, as illustrated in Figure 1.5. This feature of the model shows the simultaneous nature of communication, where we are sending messages to the other person even while we are decoding the message they are sending. In this model, communication flows both ways at the same time, which is a much more realistic characterization of the communication process.

Now that we have explored both what communication can do for us, and how it works, we need to dispel some misconceptions about communication that many people hold.
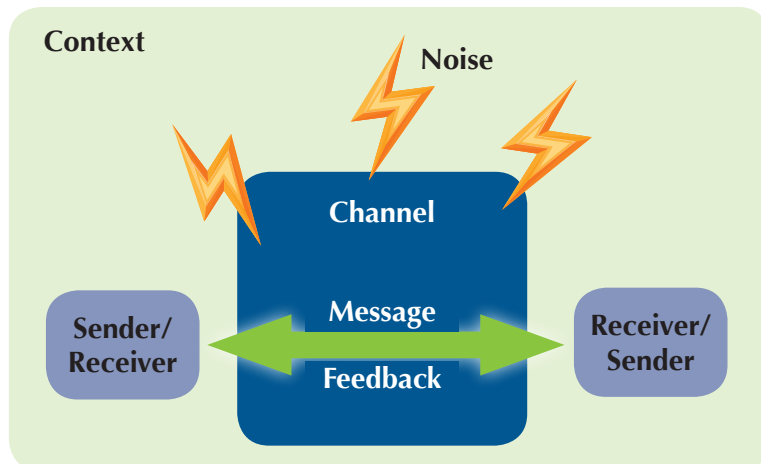
FIGURE 1.5   Transaction Model of Communication

Communication Myths

Starting from birth, when we cried to let our caregivers know we needed food or a new diaper and continuing on through our acquisition of language, we have always communicated with others. This may explain why many people believe they understand communication so well, even though they likely do not. In this section, we will explore five common misconceptions many people have about communication.

Myth #1: Everyone is an adept communicator. As noted in the previous section, we all have extensive experience with communicating, but just because we do something often does not make us experts in it. For example, a person may keep track of her personal finances, but this does not make her an expert at finance. Many people also cook, but that does not make them all chefs. What does make someone an expert in something is extensive training in his or her field, and most people do not have extensive training in communication. This is not to say that your experiences are bad or that you are impolite or even a bad communicator, but rather that there is a host of information on communication with which you are unfamiliar. This book will provide you with some of that information in a practical way so you can improve your communication skills.

Myth #2: Communication can solve any problem. Although communication can help to repair relationships and solve problems in many different circumstances, there are times when communication can actually make things worse. As social as people are, they also need their space, and it can be frustrating when we fill that space with constant communication. Additionally, not everything needs to be discussed or even addressed, and so leaving some topics alone is better than confronting them. More communication in these cases is not better; it can make things worse. In certain cases, communication can also let people know it may be time to move on, even when the intent is to bring two people back together. We will return to this myth in more detail when we cover interpersonal conflict in Chapter 12.

Myth #3: There is only one type of communication. Communication is a very broad field, and it covers a lot of activities, but there is no one way to communicate properly. The type of communication we choose to engage in is dependent on the situation in which we find ourselves. Debate and argumentation work in some cases, but dialogue can be more effective in others. Sometimes, listening is the best thing we can do. Our choice depends on the purpose of the interaction and with whom we are speaking. If a person does not adjust the way in which they communicate based on the context in which they find themselves, they increase the probability of misunderstandings and potential problems.

Myth #4: Any communication is good communication. Not all communication is positive, and sometimes we need to exercise restraint and not share certain comments or thoughts with others. Just because you want to say something, or even have the right to say something, does not mean it is good to say it. Just like any tool, communication can be used in a negative way, and, therefore, it is not always good. As an example, think about interruptions. Just because you feel the need to contribute at that moment does not mean it is

a good idea to do so. Interrupting others, though communication, is not going to create a positive experience.

Myth #5: More communication will ultimately make people agree with you. Many people believe that the reason others disagree with them is that they have not been clearly understood. As a result, they continue pushing their ideas in an effort to help the other person understand, and thus agree. It can often be the case, however, that the other person does understand what is being said, and yet still does not agree with it. More communication does not produce agreement in these instances, but may instead invite the opposite. It is important to recognize when a point is made and the other person just does not agree, because the more you talk in these cases, the more entrenched the other person is likely to become in the disagreement.

So far we have illustrated the complex nature of communication, how it works, and some common misunderstandings about the process people hold. In the final section of this chapter, we will define what it means to be a competent communicator.

DIALING DIVERSITY

The Culture of Business Cards

When two professionals meet, it is common practice to exchange business cards. The business cards often contain a company name, the individual's name and job title, contact information, and sometimes even a picture. In the United States, it is common to see people take a business card, not look at it, and simply place it in a pocket or even fold it up. They also may take the card and write some notes on it during the meeting. Americans do not find this practice offensive; however, other cultures do. For instance, many Asian professionals expect a person to whom they give their business card to read it and then put it in a place that will keep it from being crinkled. They see this as a sign of respect, because the business card for them is a shorthand for who they are and what they have accomplished, a resume of sorts. To write on it, fold it, or ignore it tells them that not just the card, but who the card represents, is not of any value to the receiver. When interacting with people from different backgrounds, it is important to take their expectations into account. If you do not, you risk damaging or even destroying the relationship. Ignore business cards at your own risk!

The Competent Communicator

Just as there are several misconceptions regarding communication, there are things communication scholars know make up good communication between people. When we think of good communicators we have encountered, we often think of those people as being able to effectively and appropriately interact in any situation. This is also how scholars define **communication competence**. The effectiveness of communication refers to how well it achieves its purpose, and embedded within this definition is the idea that the strategic choices we make about how we communicate with others in a given situation directly influence the degree to which our message can be successful. The appropriateness of communication refers to our ability to pay attention to the rules and expectations of a given situation, something made very difficult when it comes to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. In this section of the chapter, we will detail five characteristics exhibited by competent communicators.

Communication competence the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in any given situation

Self-awareness

A competent communicator pays attention to his or her behaviors and comments, and how those influence or affect other people. The process of being attuned to how our actions and messages impact others is called **self-monitoring**. People who are high self-monitors pay close attention to how they look, sound, and react, as well as what they say when in situations with other people. By contrast, low self-monitors pay minimal attention to these things, and are thus not aware that they may be making a negative impression on others. Being a high self-monitor allows people to adjust to different responses and situations.

Self-monitoring the process of being attuned to how your actions and messages impact others

Responsiveness and Adaptability

Good communicators must not only be cognizant of their own actions and reactions, but also must be able to act upon those observations in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Responding to others and adapting your messages and behaviors in different social situations is an important skill exhibited by competent communicators. Remember that communication is not a one-size-fits-all tool, and thus competent communicators know how to adapt their communication to the responses of others and the various situations in which they find themselves.

> *The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have meaning; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities.*[9]
>
> *—C. E. Shannon*

Generalized other
a composite mental image we use to bounce our potential statements or behaviors off of before we actually enact them

Empathy
the ability to understand and feel the same way as another person

Cognitive complexity
the ability to recognize multiple potential ways in which a situation or message could be understood or interpreted

Person-centered Messages

Too often we get lost in ourselves and forget to consider other people. Good communicators consistently take other people's thoughts, ideas, and feelings into account and create what researcher Jesse Delia calls "person-centered messages."[10] Noted scholar, George Herbert Mead, proposed a concept called the **generalized other**, which is a composite mental image upon which we practice our potential statements or behaviors before we actually enact them.[11] This allows us to anticipate how we think other people might react, and thus adapt accordingly. It also helps us experience **empathy**, or the ability to understand and feel the emotions that another person is experiencing. People who are other-oriented have strong generalized others, while those who are more focused on themselves skip the step of anticipating reactions through the generalized other altogether.

Cognitive Complexity

In most cases, there is more than one potential explanation for a behavior or message, and **cognitive complexity** is the ability to recognize multiple ways in which a situation or message could be understood or interpreted. This skill involves being attuned to the dimensions of the context in which people find themselves, and their ability to appreciate the different variables that could influence what, why, and how another person acts and speaks the way he or she does in a given circumstance. Increasing cognitive complexity involves patience and a willingness to have an open mind.

Ethics and Civility

Competent communicators understand and act upon what they believe is the right way to interact in a given situation. They communicate honestly, use good manners, are polite, and also are assertive. All but the last of these qualities may be something you readily understand, but it is important to note that assertiveness does not mean aggressiveness. Competent communicators know how to respectfully state a position in a way that does not offend others or make them defensive, and that is what we mean by being assertive. Competent communicators also know when to exercise self-restraint and to not share something with another party. Communicating in a civil and ethical fashion involves knowing the right and wrong way to communicate, acting on the former, and doing so in a manner that respects both yourself and those around you.

Being a competent communicator is much more involved than many people realize. In this book, we use the best research by experts in the field to provide you with a detailed understanding of how to improve your communication skills.

Summary

In this chapter, we defined communication and provided insight into the benefits good communication produces for people. We also explained the various components of the communication process, and dispelled some widely held myths regarding com-

munication. Finally, we introduced some qualities and characteristics of competent communicators that will be further explored throughout the remainder of this book. Communication is a complex process that works differently in different situations, and as we go further, we will delve into different communication contexts and share the tools that will help you improve your interactional skills in those situations.

Chapter 1 Key Ideas

- We communicate because communication fulfills physical, instrumental, relational, identity, and spiritual needs
- We communicate using symbol systems that include referents (actual things), thoughts (mental constructs or ideas about those things), and symbols (words or images that represent both the referent and thought)
- There are three models of communication: the action model, the interaction model, and the transaction model
- There are five common misconceptions or myths about communication: everyone is an adept communicator, communication can solve any problem, there is only one type of communication, any communication is good communication, and more communication will ultimately make people agree with you
- The five characteristics exhibited by competent communicators include (1) self-awareness, (2) responsiveness and adaptability, (3) person-centered messages, (4) cognitive complexity, and (5) ethics and civility

Chapter 1 Key Terms

Unit of analysis	Decoding	Self-monitoring
Encoding	Feedback	Generalized other
Channel	Context	Empathy
Noise	Communication competence	Cognitive complexity