

## Interpersonal Communication Competence

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Now that we have previewed the study of interpersonal communication, you may be saying to yourself, “Well, that’s all well and good, but is it possible to improve my own interpersonal communication? Aren’t some people just born with better interpersonal skills than others?” Just as some people have more musical talent or greater skill at throwing a football, evidence does suggest that some people may have an inborn, biological talent for communicating with others.<sup>89</sup>

To be a competent communicator is to express messages that are perceived to be both *effective* and *appropriate*.<sup>90</sup> You communicate effectively when your message is understood by others and achieves its intended effect. For example, if you want your roommate to stop using your hair dryer, and after you talk to him, he stops using your hair dryer, your message has been effective.

Competent communication should also be appropriate. By *appropriate*, we mean that the communicator should consider the time, place, and overall context of the message and should be sensitive to the feelings and attitudes of the listener. Who determines what is appropriate? Communication scholar Mary Jane Collier suggests that competence is a concept based on privilege; to label someone as competent means that another person has made a judgment as to what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior. Collier asks the following questions: “. . . competence and acceptance for whom? Who decides the criteria? Who doesn’t? Competent or acceptable on the basis of what social and historical context?”<sup>91</sup> Collier points out that we have to be careful not to insist on one approach (our own approach) to interpersonal communication competence. *There is no single best way to communicate with others*. There are, however, avenues that can help you become both more effective and more appropriate when communicating with others.<sup>92</sup> We suggest a two-part strategy for becoming a more competent communicator. First, competent communicators are knowledgeable, skilled, and motivated.<sup>93</sup> Second, they draw on their knowledge, skill, and motivation to become other-oriented.

### Become Knowledgeable, Skilled, and Motivated

**Become Knowledgeable.** By reading this chapter, you have already begun improving your interpersonal communication competence. Effective communicators are knowledgeable. They know how communication works. They understand the components, principles, and rules of the communication process. As you read further in this book, you will learn theories, principles, concepts, and rules that will help you explain and predict how humans communicate interpersonally.

Understanding these things is a necessary prerequisite for enhancing your interpersonal effectiveness, but this kind of knowledge alone does not make you an effective communicator. You would not let someone fix your car’s carburetor if he or she had only read a book. Knowledge must be coupled with skill. And we acquire skill through practice.



**Become Skilled.** Effective communicators know how to translate knowledge into action.<sup>94</sup> You can memorize the characteristics of a good listener but still not listen well. To develop skill requires practice and helpful feedback from others who can confirm the appropriateness of your actions.<sup>95</sup>

It has been suggested that learning a social skill is not much different from learning how to drive a car or operate a computer.<sup>96</sup> To learn any skill, you must break it down into subskills that you can learn and practice. “Hear it, see it, do it, correct it” is the formula that seems to work best for learning any new behaviors. In this book, we examine the elements of complex skills (such as listening), offer activities that let you practice the skills, and provide opportunities for you to receive feedback and correct your application of the skills.<sup>97</sup>



**Become Motivated.** Practicing skills requires work. You need to be motivated to use your knowledge and skill. You must want to improve, and you must have a genuine desire to connect with others if you wish to become a competent communicator. You may know people who understand how to drive a car and have the skill to drive, yet hesitate to get behind the wheel. Or maybe you know someone who took a course in public speaking but is reluctant to stand in front of a crowd. Similarly, someone may pass a test about interpersonal communication principles with flying colors, but unless that person is motivated to use those newfound skills, his or her interactions with others may not improve.

### Become Other-Oriented

It's not always about you. Lucy Van Pelt, in the Peanuts cartoon above, seems startled to learn that the world does not revolve around her. Perhaps you know someone like Lucy. Sometimes we may need someone like Linus to remind us that we're not the center of the universe. The signature concept for our study of interpersonal communication is the goal of becoming other-oriented in relationships. As noted earlier, to be an other-oriented communicator is to consider the thoughts, needs, experiences, personality, emotions, motives, desires, culture, and goals of your communication partners, while still maintaining your own integrity. The choices we make in forming our messages, in deciding how best to express those messages, and in deciding when and where to deliver those messages will be made more effectively when we consider the other person's thoughts and feelings. *To emphasize the importance of being an other-oriented communicator, throughout this book we will offer sidebar comments and questions to help you apply the concept of being other-oriented to your own interpersonal relationships.*

Being other-oriented involves a conscious effort to consider the world from the point of view of those with whom you interact.<sup>98</sup> This effort occurs almost automatically when you are communicating with those you like or who are similar to you. Thinking about the thoughts and feelings of those you dislike or who are different from you is more difficult and requires more effort and commitment.

Sometimes, we are **egocentric communicators**; we create messages without giving much thought to the person who is listening. To be egocentric is to be self-focused and self-absorbed. Scholars of evolution might argue that our tendency to look out for Number One ensures the continuation of the human species and is therefore a good thing.<sup>99</sup> Yet, it is difficult to communicate effectively when we focus exclusively on ourselves. Research suggests that being egocentric is detrimental to developing healthy relationships with others.<sup>100</sup> If we fail to adapt our message to our listener, we may not be successful in achieving our intended communication goal. Other people can often perceive whether we're self-focused or other-oriented (especially if the person we're talking with is a sensitive, other-oriented communicator).

Are people more self-focused today than in the past? Sociologist Jean Twenge suggests that people today are increasingly more narcissistic (self-focused) than they have been in previous generations—she dubs today's narcissistic generation the “me generation.” Her research

#### BEING Other-ORIENTED

Being other-oriented means focusing on the interests, needs, and goals of another person. Think about a person who is important to you—it could be a family member, close friend, lover, or colleague. Consider the other-oriented nature of the relationship you have with this person. Are there specific things you say, gifts you have given, or activities that you do with this person that demonstrate your focus on *his or her* interests, needs, and desires? What things does this person do that reflect his or her other-orientation toward you?

**egocentric communicator**  
Person who creates messages without giving much thought to the person who is listening; a communicator who is self-focused and self-absorbed.



found that “in the early 1950s, only 12 percent of teens aged 14 to 16 agreed with the statement ‘I am an important person.’ By the late 1980s, an incredible 80 percent—almost seven times as many—claimed they were important.”<sup>101</sup> Twenge and two of her colleagues found evidence for an increased self-focus among students in the twenty-first century.<sup>102</sup>

We may find ourselves speaking without considering the thoughts and feelings of our listener when we have a need to purge ourselves emotionally or to confirm our sense of self-importance, but doing so usually undermines our relationships with others. A self-focused communicator often alienates others. Research suggests that fortunately, almost by necessity, we adapt to our partner in order to carry on a conversation.<sup>103</sup>

How do you become other-oriented? Being other-oriented is really a collection of skills rather than a single skill. The practical information throughout this book will help you develop this collection of essential communication skills, including being self-aware, being aware of others, using and interpreting verbal messages, using and interpreting nonverbal messages, and listening and responding to others.<sup>104</sup> Being empathic—able to experience the feelings and emotions of others—is especially important in becoming other-oriented. After listening to and empathizing with others, someone who is other-oriented is able to appropriately adapt messages to them.

To appropriately adapt messages to others is to be flexible. In this book, we do not identify tidy lists of sure-fire strategies that you can always use to win friends and influence people. The same set of skills is not effective in every situation, so other-oriented communicators do not assume that “one size fits all.” Rather, they assess each unique situation and adapt their behavior to achieve the desired outcome. Adaptation includes such things as simply asking questions in response to a communication partner’s disclosures, finding topics of mutual interest to discuss, selecting words and examples that are meaningful to our partner, and avoiding topics that we don’t feel comfortable discussing with another person. Adapting messages to others does *not* mean that we tell them only what they want to hear; that would be unethical.

Other-oriented communicators are ethical. **Ethics** are the beliefs, values, and moral principles by which we determine what is right or wrong. To be an ethical communicator means to be sensitive to the needs of others, to give people choices rather than forcing them to act a certain way. Unethical communicators believe that they know what other people need, even without asking them for their preferences. As we discuss in Chapter 6, being manipulative and forcing opinions on others usually results in a climate of defensiveness. Effective communicators seek to establish trust and reduce interpersonal barriers, rather than erect them. Ethical communicators keep confidences; they keep private information that others wish to be kept private. They also do not intentionally decrease others’ feelings of self-worth. Another key element in being an ethical communicator is honesty. If you intentionally lie or distort the truth, then you are not communicating ethically or effectively. Ethical communicators also don’t tell people only what they want to hear. At the end of each chapter, in our Study Guide section, we pose ethical questions to help you explore the ethics of interpersonal relationships.

In addition to appropriately and ethically adapting to others, being other-oriented includes developing positive, healthy attitudes about yourself and others. In 1951, Carl Rogers wrote a pioneering book called *Client-Centered Therapy*, which transformed the field of psychotherapy. In it, Rogers explains how genuine positive regard for another person and an open supportive communication climate lay the foundation for trusting relationships. But Rogers did not invent the concept of developing a positive, healthy regard for others. The core principles of every religion and faith movement in the last 5000 years include a focus on the needs of others. Our purpose is certainly not to promote a specific religion or set of spiritual beliefs. What we suggest is that becoming other-oriented, as evidenced through knowledge, skill, and motivation, can enhance your interpersonal communication competence and the quality of your life.

**ethics** The beliefs, values, and moral principles by which a person determines what is right or wrong.

## APPLYING AN OTHER-ORIENTATION to Being a Competent Interpersonal Communicator

To be a competent interpersonal communicator is to be an other-oriented communicator—to focus on the needs, interests, values, and behaviors of others while being true to your own principles and ethical credo. In this chapter we've previewed some of the knowledge, provided a rationale for being motivated to master interpersonal competencies, and offered a glimpse of the skills that enhance an other-orientation.

**Knowledge.** When you view communication as a transactive process rather than as a simplistic action or even an interactive process, you gain realistic insight into the challenge of communicating with others and the potential for misunderstandings. Knowing the messiness and

dynamic nature of communication, as well as the various components of the process (source, message, channel, receiver, context, and feedback) can help you better diagnose communication issues in your own relationships and improve your ability to accurately decode the messages of others.

**Motivation.** Why learn how to be other-oriented? As we've noted, learning about interpersonal communication has the potential to enhance both the quality of your relationships with others and your health. Developing your skill and knowledge of interpersonal communication can enhance your confidence to improve your relationships with family members, friends, lovers, and colleagues.

**Skill.** To be competently other-oriented takes more than knowledge of the elements and nature of communication (although that's a good start), and more than a strong motivation to enhance your abilities. It takes skill. As you begin your study of interpersonal communication, you can be confident that in the chapters ahead you will learn how to listen, respond, use, and interpret verbal messages, express and interpret emotional meanings of messages, more accurately use and interpret nonverbal messages, manage conflict, and adapt to human differences. To be other-oriented is to have the knowledge, nurture the motivation, and develop the skill to relate to others in effective and ethical ways.

### Assignment 02(Team work):

To develop an awareness of being other-oriented with a communication partner, role-play the following interpersonal situations in two ways. First, role-play the scene as a communicator who is not other-oriented but rather self-focused. Then re-enact or rewrite the same scene as a communicator who is other-oriented someone who considers the thoughts and feelings of the other person while maintaining his or her own integrity.

#### **Suggested situations: (use the same situation for both conversations self-focused and other-oriented)**

- Return a broken DVD player to a department store salesperson.
- Correct a grocery store cashier who has scanned an item at the wrong price.
- Meet with a teacher who gave you a failing grade.
- Ask your professor for a one-day extension on a paper that is due tomorrow.
- Ask someone for a donation to a worthy cause.
- Ask a professor for permission to get into a class that has reached its maximum enrollment.
- Accept an unappealing book or DVD as a gift from a friend.