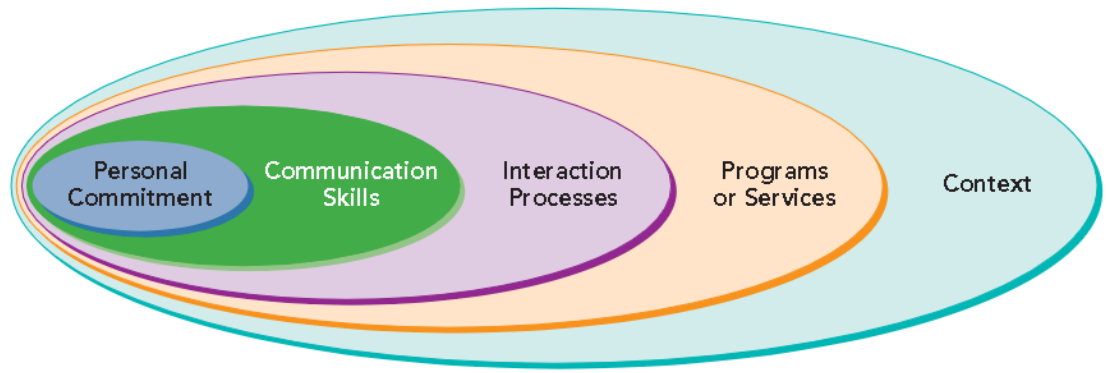


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2 Interpersonal Communication

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CONNECTIONS

The foundational understandings of collaboration presented in Chapter 1 provide a basis for beginning an exploration of the specific communication skills that contribute to its effectiveness and is the focus for this chapter as well as the two that follow. In this chapter, you will learn about the nature of interpersonal communication and how it occurs, topics that appear to have a commonsense origin but that have technical meaning for collaboration and profoundly affect its outcomes. You will also explore how perspective influences communication, consider factors that affect listening, examine the impact of nonverbal communication, and outline principles to guide your interpersonal communication success. The information in this set of three chapters should be applied in the collaborative endeavors that are described in later chapters, including teaming, co-teaching, and consultation.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

1. Apply your understanding of differing views of communication and their common elements to communication situations you have encountered or will encounter as an education professional.
2. Define the term *interpersonal communication* and its critical elements, describing the process by which meaning is communicated through it and illustrating your understanding with examples from your professional or related experiences.
3. Analyze interpersonal competence, including perspective and perception and the influence of culture on them, and outline strategies for attaining it.
4. Explain how the perceptual process creates misunderstandings, and generate ways to improve your perceptual accuracy.



A CASE FOR COLLABORATION

A Matter of Misunderstanding

Kim and Lena, two of the grade-level team leaders in Kirby Middle School, have worked together for a year and have come to view themselves as friends and good teammates. As Lena entered the cafeteria to get coffee before school, she greeted Kim enthusiastically and exclaimed, "How about Sparks last night? He's something else with those dunks. I'm so stoked for the next game!" She pretended to shoot a basketball to punctuate her comments as she almost squealed, "We're going to Bloomington!" Lena was talking excitedly about their alma mater's basketball game the night before. Without waiting for a reply, she plunged into more details, describing several of the plays as well as the team's certain chances for sweeping the conference and the championship. Lena soon realized that Kim was looking at her with a seemingly disinterested, possibly irritated, expression. She couldn't determine whether Kim was unhappy, angry at her, or, for that matter, whether Kim's response had anything to do with her at all. Lena's sports commentary trailed off and she asked Kim what was wrong. Kim flatly said, "Nothing." She looked away and shook her head, got up from her chair, took her coffee, and as she left the cafeteria with what Lena now determined to be a disapproving look, Kim remarked, "Not everyone had the luxury of watching the game. Some of us had to work." Lena called after her saying she was sorry Kim had missed the game and suggested they could make up for it with a girls' night out on Friday. As Kim was leaving, Lena thought, "It's too bad that she had work to do, but I don't know why that has anything to do with me."

Introduction

Does the preceding story sound familiar? How you communicate is critical to both your personal and professional success. In this chapter, we focus on how communication influences your professional interactions and their effectiveness. Your knowledge of the nuances of communication and your communication skills are essential in the performance of your instructional, administrative, planning, or other educational responsibilities, as well as in your collaboration with colleagues and parents. Because of this, many professional preparation programs and school-based performance reviews include an evaluation of communication skills, and increasingly, certification and licensure in education and related professions require similar evidence of strong communication abilities.

But this emphasis on communication also creates a problem: Many professionals argue that they understand communication and do not need to review information such as that presented in this chapter. However, knowing about communication is vastly different from grasping its nuances and deliberately using it as a tool for fostering effective interactions with others. It is the more specialized and technical view of communication skills that is the focus of the information that follows.

Understanding Communication

To become adept at professional interpersonal communication, you must first become familiar with the general and universal aspects involved in all human communication, which shares a set of characteristics and elements, a set of root principles. By mastering these features, you will become a student of interpersonal communication practices and skills, applying them to support your collaborative endeavors.

Human communication is considered a rich and complex field of study, explored by scholars and theorists who describe it in diverse ways. That diversity represents the many disciplines from which this relatively new area of inquiry has evolved—including psychology, sociology, social psychology, and philosophy. Consequently, the definitions of communication found in scholarly sources vary tremendously: A recently conducted extensive review identified 15 different conceptual components associated with over 126 different definitions (Lustig & Koester, 2013). Some scholars view communication as a process of transmitting information from one person to another or to groups. Others are more concerned with the processes by which people express meaning and exchange understandings through communication. To avoid these sometimes confusing alternatives, for this text the following definition is utilized:

Communication is the management of messages with the objective of creating meaning.

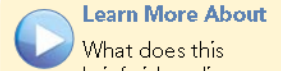
Using such a definition, it can be clarified that communication occurs within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media and includes both verbal and nonverbal messages as well as technology-mediated messages (Beebe & Masterson, 2015; Floyd, 2014). In addition, the definition provides the basis for examining traditional and contemporary views of communication as they exist in today's schools.

Views of Communication

Advances in educational thinking and instructional practice encourage teachers to interact collaboratively with learners and extend learner interactions with others, both locally and globally (Council for Chief State School Officers, 2011; Ladd et al., 2014). What view of communication do such models encourage? On the other hand, in too many settings the primary instructional mode continues to rely on teacher presentation. In fact, despite extensive conversations in the profession about student engagement and participation (e.g., Cooper, 2014), the majority of communication in schools involves the presentation of information by one person to others. This is often the case when leaders provide information school-wide as well as when teachers provide instruction. What perspective of communication does this suggest? As you reflect on the following three views of communication, think about how they are manifested in schools, how common each is, and how you have experienced each of them. Figure 2.1 provides an overview of these perspectives.

Linear View In the linear view or model, communication is seen as a one-way “information transfer” event in which a sender encodes, or constructs, a message and delivers it to a relatively passive receiver who decodes or interprets it. A message is not limited to words; it is the totality of what is communicated—the words, noises, facial expressions, and stance of the communicator. Verbal messages are composed of printed or spoken words; nonverbal messages are conveyed by behaviors other than words (e.g., facial expressions, vocal noises, and gestures). Everything a communicator says or does, as well as the richness of the expression, is potentially part of the message. The communication occurs within an environment—that is, the surroundings or a physical location—but the environment is influenced by personal experiences. Naturally, that relationship goes both ways because the environment can also affect interpretation. Varying kinds of noise can interfere with the accurate transmission of a message. Noise may be physical (e.g., an alarm or siren), psychological (e.g., thoughts, biases), semantic (e.g., language differences), or physiological (biological influences). The nature of the message, the channel selected, the noise, and the environment may all influence the success of the communication. The terms used to label features in this communication view apply to the other views as well, and they are highlighted in Putting Ideas into Practice.

The linear model is quite common among professionals in school settings; it is the unilateral communication that is used to transmit information through such differing channels as memos, podcasts, online modules, web postings, and announcements over



Learn More About

What does this brief video clip about teachers collaborating in the classroom suggest to you about the importance of interpersonal communication for establishing parity?

FIGURE 2.1 Views of communication.

Understanding of the communication process have advanced over the years. In each of the three views outlined here, the roles of the individuals involved and the understanding of the message being communicated vary according to the interactivity available to both the sender and the receiver.

Linear View. Communication is a one-way process in which a sender constructs and transmits a message to a relatively passive receiver who decodes it. It is generally not face-to-face, often technology mediated, and asynchronous. Feedback, if any, is delayed. The sender's message is to be understood as delivered.



Interactional View. In this two-way process, a sender and a receiver alternately exchange information. The sender transmits a message; the receiver decodes it and responds with feedback. If feedback indicates misunderstanding, the sender is likely to revise the message. Communication is complete when the receiver's feedback indicates understanding of the message.



Transactional View. As a communicator sends a message, he or she simultaneously receives information from the message itself and from the person with whom he or she is communicating. The communicators are interdependent in that they co-construct shared meanings by continuously exchanging messages.



the school's public address system. When this type of communication occurs, it is often technology mediated and usually does not occur in person. Feedback is not expected, and if it does occur, it is delayed. The sender's initial message contains the meaning of the communication, and others are expected to understand it as it was transmitted. Of course, those who receive the message may understand the message in a manner not intended by the sender. An illustration of such misunderstood communication occurred in Lena's experience in the opening case, which is continued here.

Later that day as Lena was leaving the lunchroom, another team leader, Jill, asked rather pointedly where she had been the afternoon before. Lena was surprised at her directness, but explained she had left right after school to shop for drinks and snacks because she had invited college friends over to watch the playoff game that evening. Jill was again direct as she told Lena that their team leader meeting had lasted until 7:30 p.m. because there was no one there to represent Lena's area, and the other team leaders had to research the databases to gather the information she was to have collected earlier. Lena looked shocked and asked, "What team meeting?" Jill was hurrying to get to her class but quickly told Lena it was the meeting described in the e-mail she had received two days earlier.

Lena was confused and went directly to check her e-mail after she finished lunch. She had been happy to get the principal's message early the other morning. It described the ways the principal wanted some data to be managed and stated, "Team leaders may defer their meeting until after school is out to aggregate the data sets." Lena had been relieved that the meeting was



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Coming to Terms with Communication Terms

Communicator: one who simultaneously performs the *sender* functions (formulates and sends messages) and the *receiver* functions (perceives and comprehends messages) in communication.

Encoding: the process of putting thoughts and feelings into verbal and/or nonverbal messages.

Decoding: the reverse of encoding; involves developing a thought or meaning based on hearing and/or seeing messages, whether verbal and/or nonverbal.

Message: spoken, written, or unspoken information sent from one communicator to another.

Feedback: a verbal or nonverbal response to a message that provides information about how the

message was received. Feedback may be internal (how we assess our own communication) or external (feedback from others).

Channel: vehicle or pathway through which a message is sent (e.g., face-to-face, podcast, paper memo).

Noise: anything that interferes with the accurate transmission or reception of a message. It may be physical (e.g., siren, pop-up ad), physiological (e.g., biological, hearing loss), psychological (e.g., biases, emotions), or semantic (e.g., language, jargon).

Environment: physical location, surroundings, or context that can affect how individuals understand others' behaviors.

deferred until next week after the school year ended. Now she realized, based on reactions from Kim and Jill, that there was more than one definition of “after school is out” operating. Apparently, it had meant “after school is out” on the day of the regularly scheduled team leader meeting.

This illustrates a misunderstanding caused by linear, or unilateral, communication. Without feedback or opportunities to seek clarification of the message, Lena gave it her own, albeit incorrect, meaning.

Precisely because of the lack of feedback, linear view communication of all kinds runs the risk of being misunderstood. Ensuring accurate understanding is difficult in the absence of reactions or responses indicating whether the receivers understand the message. Straightforward reports of facts, events, or previously debated policy are the types of information that have the least potential for troubling misunderstanding, for example, in e-mail communication.

Interactional View The interactional view extends the linear model to recognize communication as occurring through an interactive and two-way process in which information is exchanged alternately between a sender and a receiver who take turns speaking and listening. In this view, speaking and listening are considered sequential and separate acts that occur at different times and one after another. The sender encodes a message in a way that can be understood by the receiver and then delivers it to the receiver. The receiver perceives the message, decodes it, and responds. The receiver's response, or feedback, lets the sender know how the message was received and whether it was understood. This real-time, two-way communication is highly dependent on feedback. Feedback may be external, coming from the receiver, or internal, insofar as the sender assesses and reflects on his or her own communication. Communication is considered complete when the receiver's feedback lets the sender know or conclude that the information has been understood.

In schools, interactional communication occurs as someone describes, directs, explains, or lectures, and others read, listen, understand, and respond. Those interactions are routine as teachers present information or give directions to their students and students provide feedback in the form of questions, comments, or performances. Similarly, leaders deliver information or give directions in staff meetings, lectures, and professional development activities and receive feedback from those involved. Based on feedback, a teacher may decide to reteach or explain material differently, and a



E-mail, social media, and other electronic communication options are useful, but they also include a significant risk for confusion and misunderstanding.

leader may see the need to rephrase a concept or describe something in a different manner. Had the information about rescheduling the team leader meeting to “after school is out” been given in face-to-face interaction, Lena may well have commented to the group or to Kim about how glad she was to have the extra time to prepare for her guests that evening. That statement would have served as feedback that she did not understand the meaning as others did, and it could have been corrected.

Transactional View A transactional view is regarded as a more contemporary and sophisticated framework that better represents the complexity and subtlety of the communication process (Beebe & Masterson, 2015; Harris & Sherblom, 2011; Wood, 2013).

In the transactional model, the concepts and roles of sender and receiver are extended and blended as both participants are in both roles simultaneously; both of them participate as communicators. At the same time that Communicator A is sending a message, she is also receiving information from Communicator B. At the same time Communicator B is receiving a message, he is also sending information to Communicator A. The communicators are interdependent in that they co-construct meaning through their continuous, simultaneous communications. In a transactional view, both communicators share responsibility for developing and understanding the meaning of the message.

The concepts of channel, noise, and environment mentioned in association with the other views of communication are also seen in this model, though they manifest in different ways. Their influence on the transactional communication process is significant because transactional interactions are seen in familiar dyadic or small group relationships in which you participate, in educational and community settings, in meetings you may have with individuals or small groups of students; and even when you jointly plan a project or facilitate student efforts on an assignment. Team meetings, interactions in the staff room or cafeteria, co-teacher planning and debriefing sessions, and parent conferences are all examples. In those and similar exchanges, you interact with others with whom you have or are building relationships. You are likely to be working toward a shared goal. In such cases, you often share some background and common context with the people you are working alongside. Through verbal and nonverbal means, you exchange information with them, and the process takes you closer to or further from your goals. Through your interactions, you influence your relationships with varying degrees of interpersonal communication skills.

Generally speaking, transactional communication requires that both participants are equals in communicating meaning, because meaning in an interaction is truly a co-constructed product. What does this imply for professionals’ communication in schools?



APPLY YOUR KNOWLEDGE

2.1

Defining Interpersonal Communication

Communication scholars have embraced the transactional communication model as the best representation of how interpersonal communication occurs, and this model serves as the foundation for the interaction skills and processes presented in this text. Building on the already-presented definition of basic communication, interpersonal

communication can be understood as an extension of it that incorporates transactional aspects:

Interpersonal communication is a complex, transactional process through which people create shared meanings through continuously and simultaneously exchanging messages.

This definition and the introductory description of the transactional model provide a basis for thinking about effective interpersonal communication. Your skills in applying this information in your own interactions can significantly enhance your effectiveness in the full range of your professional and personal collaborative responsibilities.

Concepts Reflected in the Interpersonal Communication Process

As you might suspect, the interpersonal communication process includes a number of critical components. Useful insights regarding this process identified by scholars such as Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2015), DeVito (2013), and Steinfatt (2009), are discussed next.

Interpersonal Communication Is Transactional Identifying interpersonal communication as transactional underscores that both communicators are simultaneously sending and receiving information, making it impossible to distinguish between a sender and a receiver. To illustrate that concept, try to discern who is sending and who is receiving information in the following instances:

- One teacher is telling another about a graphic organizer she thinks would be useful for a student in his class. The second teacher is shaking his head and scowling.
- The after-school program leader is asking a parent about her son's study space and homework schedule at home. The parent is looking sheepish and uncomfortable.
- In a staff meeting, the principal is describing a new school-wide behavior support program she observed. Most teachers are sitting quietly, but two are whispering about an earlier disruption, another is filling out a field trip request, and three others are correcting papers.

It is tempting to see the teacher, after-school program leader, and principal as senders of messages and the other teacher, parent, and group of teachers as receivers. But the teacher being told about the graphic organizer is registering a negative response; the parent is communicating that she is uncomfortable either with the question or with her child's homework situation; and the teachers at the staff meeting are displaying a lack of interest while grading papers and whispering to one another. In those examples, the receivers are sending verbal and nonverbal messages to the speakers even as the latter are speaking.

Now imagine yourself in such a situation. If at the same time you are speaking the person you are addressing responds by nodding and showing you a piece of student work that illustrates exactly the point you are making, this person is letting you know your message is being received and understood. A confused look, a frown, or a question may cause you to restate your message, whereas a smile, a nod, or an interested look may encourage you to continue speaking or to go on to your next point. It is not just others' messages that may change your communication. Consider this: When you speak, you can hear yourself and judge whether you are saying what you intended. If you think that you are being unclear, you may elaborate on or restate your message to clarify it. You may also perceive that you are talking very quickly and decide to slow your rate of speech. In fact, messages are being sent constantly by everyone involved in the communication including your messages to yourself.

Communication Through Multiple Channels *Channel* refers to the medium through which messages are transmitted. Messages are typically either seen or heard; they are transmitted through visual and vocal-auditory channels. However, all human senses may be involved in sending and receiving messages. A firm handshake or a literal pat on the



Communication occurs simultaneously through multiple channels (e.g., verbal, nonverbal), and when the messages are contradictory, others may be uncertain about the communicator's true meaning.

back transmits messages through tactile channels. Similarly, the cologne one wears or other odors one emits communicate through chemical channels.

At any given point during interpersonal communication, several messages are probably being transmitted simultaneously over different channels. Logically, sending a single message over multiple channels can strengthen or emphasize the message. You do this when you smile, nod, and touch someone's shoulder while giving that person a compliment. Alternatively, the simultaneous sending of discrepant messages through different channels complicates the communication. A person who says, "Oh, it's fine; I can make some modifications later," while crumpling a report and tossing it into the trash is sending contradictory messages over different channels. This causes confusion and misunderstandings.

It would, of course, be upsetting to a parent to learn that his or her child was injured at school. It would be far easier for you to be supportive if you could tell the parent in person rather than through another medium. But the urgency of the situation may require that you communicate it as quickly as possible by telephone, text message, or e-mail. Other disturbing or complex information that is not urgent may best be held for a day or two until you can meet directly with the individual. Putting Ideas into Practice highlights some factors to consider when you are selecting the primary channel to use in a communication.

People Create Meanings When a colleague interrupts you and says, "I hate to bother you, but . . ." after having interrupted several times earlier, several meanings could be inferred: a serious apology for another disturbance, an insincere effort to diffuse your irritation, or even a sarcastic dig because he thinks you should be helping him rather than



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

What Channel?

The channel you use as the primary one for your communication will affect the way an individual receives, understands, and responds to your message. It is likely that you use different means of transmitting messages if you are sharing daily assignments and progress reports with parents or colleagues versus sharing potentially upsetting information with those individuals. In the latter situation, for example, consider the level of support you can give when communicating face-to-face, via e-mail, or through a voice mail message. Many writers recommend considering the following factors when deciding which channel to use in communications with colleagues, friends, or parents (Adler & Elmhorst, 2013; Brantley & Miller, 2008):

- The confidentiality of the message
- How promptly you desire feedback

- The amount and complexity of the information to be conveyed
- Your control over how the message is composed
- Your control over the receiver's attention
- Your ability to assess the other's understanding
- The channel's effectiveness in conveying detailed messages

The words and nonverbal signals are given meaning by those who use and those who interpret them. Whenever individuals interact, they must observe and interpret the symbols (e.g., words, nonverbal cues) of others. They must assign some significance to the behaviors in order to make meaning of others' actions. That is, meanings are created both in and among people who express and interpret them. Together, by exchanging multiple messages, the communicators develop shared meanings.

being otherwise engaged. In fact, “I hate to bother you” seems to have almost no meaning in and of itself; it is merely a string of sounds that serves as an introduction to other communication. To have any of the meanings mentioned, then, the sentence itself—and all sentences, realistically—relies on the subtle exchanges and contexts inherent in interpreting meaning.

But the interpreting that occurs in communication often confronts barriers, and because there are many possible points of view, it is necessary to negotiate shared meanings. That negotiation creates tremendous possibilities for misinterpretation of messages, so the importance of the communicators working to establish shared meanings should not be underestimated. In order to grasp the principles at work, then, it is vital that you deeply understand some of the barriers that can interfere with clear meaning.

Environment and Noise in Communication Communicators exist in different environments, or contexts, and the extent to which their environments differ can constitute a significant problem for interpretation because those fields of experience help communicators derive meaning from each other’s messages. Thus, the environments for two communicators often can be viewed as a simple two-part Venn diagram. The section of the diagram that overlaps demonstrates that the communicators share some common backgrounds or experiences that facilitate their ability to derive shared meaning from their communication. However, those areas of background or context where they differ—they do not overlap—may interfere with, or cause misunderstanding in, their communication. Significant differences in age, political orientation, or cultural or ethnic background are examples of these areas. Noise is another important element in understanding communication. Noise is anything that interferes with or distorts the ability of communicators to exchange and make meaning of messages, and three main types of noise generally are identified:

- *Physical* noise comprises sounds and visual distractions that are external to the communicators and may interfere with the exchange, such as public address system announcements, others’ unique physical characteristics, visual gestures, or loud talking.
- *Physiological* noise is created by conditions internal to the communicators, such as physical discomfort or hearing loss.
- *Psychological* noise is a prejudicial or emotional barrier that allows biases, preconceived ideas, and the like to distort communication. An inappropriate choice of words, a person’s tendency to frown, and a person’s physical appearance are stimuli that may create psychological noise and interfere with the transmission of a message.

Recently a teacher observed that the appearance of a scantily dressed mother at a parent conference created so much “noise” that he was not able to concentrate fully on the mother’s spoken concerns. In this case, the woman’s appearance was jarring to such an extent as to disturb or interfere with the verbal communication. How might this noise have a negative effect on the conference? What other examples of “noise” can you identify from your recent professional interactions?

Principles of Interpersonal Communication

To better understand the concepts of interpersonal communication, here are a number of principles that may help you to appreciate how interpersonal communication develops and the effects it has on its participants.

Interpersonal Communication Is Unavoidable By understanding that messages are continuously exchanged through multiple channels, you will also understand that “it is impossible *not* to communicate” (Watzlawick & Beavin, 1967, p. 5). That is, whether intentionally or unintentionally, you are always communicating. It might be through a prepared statement, a slip of the tongue, a welcoming gesture, or a disinterested expression.

Learn More About

In this video clip you will hear a straightforward explanation of how “noise” in our communication affects its clarity and can lead to conflict and misinterpretation.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNoyhOab2jc>)

When you speak or remain quiet, act reserved or animated, laugh or maintain a straight face, you communicate feelings and thoughts. These may not be intended communications, but others observe and interpret them nevertheless.

Interpersonal Communication Is Irreversible What a luxury it would be to be able to edit some past conversations as we can do to word-processed documents! Everyone has seen television shows in which a calculating attorney asks a condemning question or makes a slanderous remark only to have the opposing attorney call to “Strike that remark from the record!” as it becomes indelibly imprinted on the minds of the jury. Most people can recall, often with regret, occasions when they have spoken out of turn, in frustration, or under circumstances when their better judgment or self-monitoring strategies failed them. What we say or transmit to others electronically cannot be taken back. Apologies and regrets may alleviate some of the consequences, but everyone knows all too well that they do not reverse the message. Increased mindfulness and self-monitoring can help to reduce the number of such occurrences. Strategies to avoid issues related to irreversibility when conversing on the telephone are the topic of E-Partnerships.



Learn More About

This animated professional interaction highlights several key communication principles, including the inevitability of communication and its irreversibility.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=401Y_U5GpH4)

Interpersonal Communication Has Both Content and Relational Dimensions Nearly every message exchange operates on two levels: The content level involves the explicit information being discussed, and the relational level expresses how the people involved feel about each other. This may be whether they like or dislike each other, or feel anxious or comfortable, angry, grateful, in control, subordinate, and so on. Content and relationship levels work simultaneously in a message, but their relative levels of importance vary in different circumstances (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2014; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2014). Depending on the situation, the content dimension of a message may be paramount. For example, a department head may not care much about whether the customer service



E-PARTNERSHIPS

Using Old-Fashioned Technology to Your Advantage

Many new technologies are used to support communications, but we still rely on telephones for many interactions. Many professionals conference in the evening by telephone, and much communication with families takes place the same way. Throughout this text, we stress the importance of facial expressions, stance, gestures, and other behaviors in shaping others’ perceptions of you and what you are communicating. Yet on the telephone, these parts of the message are missing. Instead, you are communicating feelings as well as meaning just as you are in face-to-face communications. Thus, it is just as important that you try to communicate the concern and attention you would in person.

- Use your body position and smile. If you are feeling anxious or angry and want to convey a calmer tone, try putting your feet on the desk or sitting in a comfortable armchair. It is also helpful to smile and nod as if you were speaking face-to-face. A smile often changes the tone of your voice. It is said that many successful salespeople have mirrors on their desks or near their telephones.
- If you take notes, tell the other person that you are doing so. Note-taking is helpful for your memory

and your records, but it may also lead to periods of silence as you try to keep up with the conversation. It is wise to tell the person in advance that you will be jotting down notes. This will help diminish the impact of the short periods of silence. It is also helpful to backtrack and ask for clarification of a previous point to demonstrate that you are indeed listening.

- When using the telephone, avoid using your computer to play games, take notes, or type e-mail messages. Computer activity is distracting, and you will miss points the other is making. Worse than that, the other person may hear your keyboard and may conclude that you are not fully attending to the conversation.
- Signal that you are listening. Your nods and smiles may help the tone of your voice, but you will need to have more than a calm tone to indicate that you are listening. Small utterances such as “Uh, huh,” “Really?” “Oh, how frustrating that must be!” and “I can imagine” let the person on the other end of the line know you are tuned in.

representative likes her as long she gets a technician scheduled to repair the Data Director program. But the relational dimension is more important than the content when she communicates with her colleague who manages the data at the school site.

Interpersonal Communication Effectiveness Is Learned Interestingly, biology affects individuals' communication styles to some extent (Horvath, 1995; McCroskey & Beatty, 2000). Based on studies of fraternal and identical twins, sociability, anger, and relaxation seem to be partly a function of genetics. Fortunately, biology is not the only factor that determines how people communicate. Effective communication, called *communication competence*, is largely a set of skills that can be learned and continually refined. In fact, a core premise of this text is that your learned communication skills facilitate or impede the array of collaborative processes and activities in which you engage as a professional.



APPLY YOUR KNOWLEDGE

2.2

Interpersonal Competence

How do you become better at collaboration? How do you enhance your relationships with other professionals, your students, and your students' parents? Successful collaborative relationships require much more than just initiating interactions and hoping that the characteristics described in Chapter 1 fall into place. They require interpersonal competence. As with any area of competence, interpersonal competence includes behavioral or skill dimensions, including communication competence, as well as cognitive ability dimensions. The cognitive dimension, called *perspective*, involves understanding how we and those with whom we interact perceive and understand the world—in other words, how we think and feel about issues, others, and ourselves. The behavioral dimensions are seen in the development, adaptation, and skillful use of communication strategies. So, how do you maximize your collaborative effectiveness? It begins with the cognitive dimension, that is, understanding the components and power of personal perspective. This domain includes perception, cultural influences on perspective, and the subsequent impact these have on interpersonal interactions.

Perspective

Each individual brings a unique perspective to every life experience. Your past experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs, personal qualities, professional preparation, and expectations of others are among the things that affect what and how you observe and perceive, and ultimately how you behave. Your perspective is a personal lens through which you filter information; it affects how you view and interpret the messages you receive or make meaning from the information others provide you. Perception and perspective are intricately entwined, and both are affected by cultural influences.

Perception

How often do you discuss a shared experience with a friend or colleague only to find later that you have quite different opinions about what transpired? Your understandings of what occurred may be so different that you even question whether you were actually at the same meeting or whether you participated in the same interaction. This is not uncommon. People are constantly bombarded with more information than their sensory systems can handle. It is impossible for people to attend to and understand everything that occurs around them. Every experience has an infinite number of sounds, sights, smells, feelings, and tastes that compete for your attention; and it is not possible to process all of these stimuli. Here is an example:

Abbie and Travis attended an after-school professional development session concerning inclusive practices and likely upcoming changes in their school's programs and services.

The speaker mentioned the importance of insisting that students with learning and behavior problems reach the highest standards but cautioned that some services in a separate setting are likely to still be appropriate and must be offered. The next day, Abbie, who finds that many students with disabilities are “too low” to succeed in her class, mentioned to Travis that she was in disbelief that she was going to be expected to have even more students—“lower” students—in her class, and without any assistance. Travis, currently enrolled in a master’s degree program emphasizing inclusive practices, disagreed. He thought the speaker was urging the teachers to rethink their assumptions about students and to become even more creative in addressing their needs. Even after a lengthy discussion, Abbie and Travis each left the conversation convinced of their own accurate understanding and of the other’s misunderstanding.

Perception, then, is the process of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning from all of the information available in a given situation (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 2009; Ventura, Salanova, & Llorens, 2015; Wood, 2013). Everyone uses that selective process. When individuals *select*, they choose, either consciously or unconsciously, to focus on certain pieces of information while largely ignoring others. This selective process is essential for coping with the tremendous amounts of both internal and external data that are part of everyday life experiences. This is often necessary in professional interactions because such communication is quite complex (Lustig & Koester, 2013). When you receive more information than you can assimilate, you ignore or filter out some information and focus your attention on other information. Generally, you pay attention to those things that capture your interests, address the purpose of the experience, or fit within a preconceived notion. After selecting and attending to specific information, you *organize* it, usually by assigning it to a category based on a schema that carries meaning for you, such as welcoming–rejecting, engaged–aloof, competitive–cooperative, hardworking–lazy, and so on. This categorization process is sometimes referred to as stereotyping and given a negative connotation. It is worth remembering that stereotypes can be negative or positive. They are the products of categorizing in the perceptual process.

Perception does not necessarily follow a sequential process. You may categorize information and then consider and interpret it. Or as you categorize, you may *interpret* immediately, or assign meaning to the information without first considering what was imparted. When someone repeatedly says, “Let’s get together for lunch sometime” but is never able to schedule the meal, you are likely, based on your past experiences, to quickly interpret the message. A final step, described by Adler and his colleagues (Adler & Elmhorst, 2013; Adler & Proctor, 2011; Adler, Rodman, & du Pré, 2014), is *negotiating*. This requires that the communicators use transactional communication to negotiate or create a shared meaning for the information being exchanged. It requires open-mindedness, suspension of judgment, and commitment to developing mutual understanding.

The steps of perception are summarized in the next Putting Ideas into Practice. They illustrate that perception is a selective and, thus, an incomplete process because it does not necessarily grasp the totality of what is being communicated. Consequently, understanding perception helps us to recognize how we form impressions of people with whom we interact, how those impressions influence our encounters, and how we then interpret our interactions and their meaning. Consider the following exchange during a district-wide meeting of the math department chairs.

Theresa, a recently appointed department chair, has been an active union member since she began teaching four years ago. In the last department chair meeting, she strongly supported district-wide adoption of a new instructional program for the math departments but advised against doing anything that might be perceived as violating the teachers’ contract, especially regarding uncompensated time. She was asked to give a report and propose a solution at the next meeting.

Today she distributed a memo detailing five points and commented, “This proposal will honor the contract and teachers while requiring no additional costs. The program calls for 10 hours of uncompensated staff development time beyond the



Learn More About

After you watch this video on selective perception, discuss with classmates what you learned and how it applies to your professional responsibilities.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdCN7JcJrk>)



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Perception Is a Selective Process

Perception is an active process of becoming aware of objects, events, and people through sight, sound, smell, hearing, and taste. It is a necessary process for managing the enormous amount of internal and external data accompanying every life event.

- *Attending and selecting* involve sorting out stimuli—paying attention to some and ignoring others. With selective perception, attention is given to the things that are of most interest, are most pronounced, or seem most likely to meet one's needs.
- *Organizing* is arranging selected information in some meaningful way. Typically this requires categorizing information using schema based on similarities (e.g., age, gender, profession). This is also a selective process; choosing one category ignores another.
- *Interpreting* occurs when meaning is assigned to what has been perceived. This is influenced by such factors as involvement and past experience with a person, general assumptions about human behavior, expectations for the situation, and knowledge of a similar experience.
- *Negotiating* clearly reflects the transactional nature of communication. This is the process through which communicators influence each other's perceptions during communication and create shared meanings.

eight hours provided for in our contract, but we can't make teachers do more than the contract requires. I've reviewed the contract carefully and discussed it with the chapter president. We agree that using some of the pooled collaboration times we've created for team planning would not violate the contract, and so it wouldn't be the basis of a successful grievance either."

Theresa was a bit self-conscious. This seemed so simple and the information hardly warranted a memo and presentation. "Everyone must think I'm trying to be in charge—or they think I don't think they know anything! I need to avoid making this a bigger deal than it is." She looked at the group and saw that Vanessa was frowning, shaking her head, and whispering to David. Sino and Elaine were also whispering, but smiling and pointing to a section of the memo. Jasmine and Andrea were quietly reading the memo. Theresa thought, "Vanessa is always so negative about everything. She seems to take joy in making others look bad. Let's see what she has in store for me before I sit down." She asked, "So, Vanessa, do you have a problem with this?" Vanessa said she had no questions. Theresa asked the others, and no one else had questions or comments. Theresa was satisfied that her introductory statement and memo were clear, and rather than continue with the details, she smiled and ended her report.

Before reading further, reflect on this vignette, and test your perspective-taking skills. Using just the information provided, what meanings could be attributed to each person's behavior in the scenario? How would you analyze Theresa's perceptions of this experience? Did she believe others understood and accepted her proposal? What about the perceptions of the others? In this case, there were several different perceptions operating, including these possibilities:

- Vanessa and David were talking about how difficult implementing any change would be in their departments. They did not listen to much of what Theresa had to offer.
 - They attended to the notion of change and its meaning to them.
 - Theresa perceived Vanessa's behavior according to past experience.
- Sino thought, "Oh, of course! It's Theresa, and here she goes with another collective bargaining lecture and why we should all be active in the union." He looked at the memo and marked a few less-than-critical points.
 - His bias focused his attention only on union references in her memo and presentation.
- Andrea thought, "This really made it worth coming to this meeting! It's a real advantage to have Theresa's sensitivity to the contract in this group."

- Jasmine wanted more details, but Theresa hadn't welcomed even a questioning look from Vanessa. Jasmine didn't want a similar response.
- Her focus went to Theresa's affect with Vanessa. She interpreted it as aloof and off-putting. Jasmine's need to avoid such a response kept her from asking for information.

Throughout the day, different group members queried Theresa about details and thanked her for her insight and creative solution. Jasmine talked with her individually and was surprised at how friendly and patient she was. Theresa provided Jasmine with the details she needed to understand the proposal. As Theresa welcomed her questions, Jasmine revised her initial perception of Theresa as aloof and off-putting, and Theresa revised her initial perception that her proposal had been simple and fully understood.

Following the exchange just described, group members gathered more information during the day, fleshed out the plan, and then adopted it. The scenario illustrates ways in which members of the group picked up on information she presented, but attended to different aspects of it based on their prejudgments and individual needs. You can understand the thoughts of the various members when you consider their different biases and interests. The group members identified and selectively perceived something in Theresa's statements that corresponded with elements in their own perspectives. Theresa also responded to the messages she perceived were being communicated, and in this example she inaccurately assumed that the group did not need to discuss details to understand the proposal.

The take-away message for professionals who engage in collaborative activities is clear: Your perceptions and prejudgments strongly influence your understanding of others and their communication with you. You can become more aware of how you perceive others and learn to consider multiple perspectives of others by constantly challenging yourself to develop alternative explanations for others' statements. Other approaches to improving the accuracy of your perceptions are suggested in *Putting Ideas into Practice*.

Professional Perspective Your general professional socialization contributes to your perspective and merits separate attention. For example, the traditional professional preparation experiences of many teachers and other school personnel have focused on solo professional or isolated practice, and that approach is only slowly shifting to collaborative models. Thus, student teaching or practicum often is considered successful when these



Learn More About

Have you ever known someone like this woman? Could you ever sound like her? How might this communication pattern negatively affect interactions with colleagues, paraprofessionals, and parents?

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjfSuOq6ReA>)



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Managing Perceptions

Understand Your Personal Views

Each person enters interpersonal encounters with a unique perspective or worldview. This is an individual or personalized frame for viewing life and its events. You need to be aware of your own biases and monitor to ensure that they do not unduly influence how you regard and interact with others.

Analyze Your Personal State

Recognize how your emotional or physiological state influences your perceptions. An event may seem pleasant or enjoyable if you are in a good mood and well-rested and unpleasant if you are not.

Avoid Early Conclusions

Recall that one of the purposes of the perceptual process is to select what gets your attention. Therefore, you

ignore other information. You should seek additional cues before making judgments.

Seek Clarification

Ask others for explanations or clarification about your perceptions. It promotes dialogue and communicates that you truly wish to gain an accurate understanding.

Watch for Confirmation or Disconfirmation Biases

People have a tendency to look for and believe that which supports their biases and to avoid or discount anything that challenges or disconfirms their position. Your task is to stay alert and avoid the effects of either of those types of bias.

novice educators can manage their assignments independently. Despite this similarity in professional preparation, the specific discipline into which you were socialized (e.g., school psychology, literacy, library science, special education) and through which you prepared for a particular professional role (e.g., English teacher, administrator, counselor, speech/language therapist) also contributes elements to your frame of reference. This latter component may be considerably different from that of colleagues in other disciplines.

For example, general education teachers and special services providers may have pronounced differences in how they perceive their responsibility for facilitating the learning of individual students. Consistent with their disciplinary preparation in general education, general education teachers are likely to view their primary responsibilities as facilitating the progress of a *group* of students through a prescribed curriculum to meet established grade-level standards. Their professional studies emphasized curriculum scope and sequence, instructional methodology, pacing, techniques for group management, and strategies for delivering specific subject-matter content. Group instructional strategies, curriculum coverage, and assessment of performance based on established standards are central—appropriately so—in the ways in which they think about their responsibilities.

On the other hand, the professional preparation and socialization of special services providers probably placed more emphasis on individual variations in human development and learning, assessment of individual differences and learning needs, learning models stressing mastery, and intervention strategies to respond to unique needs of individual students. Not surprisingly, these professionals typically believe their primary responsibilities are to identify a student's current level of functioning, learning needs, and preferred learning mode and then to design and deliver services tailored to meet those needs. Their professional background, a major influence on their perspective, leads them to focus on the unique needs of *individual* students. These differences in teachers' and special services providers' professional perspectives may have a profound impact on how they interact with one another. For you to collaborate successfully, you will no doubt find that awareness of these variations and sensitivity to their influences are essential.

Although the various disciplines that provide specialized services may share many similarities, substantial differences can also characterize their perspectives. Some of these differences reflect the diverse philosophical and theoretical orientations within these fields (e.g., a preference for developmental versus behavioral approaches), some reflect variations in the nature of the special services provided (e.g., specialized instruction, clinically based therapy, or diagnostic evaluation), and still others relate to the specific knowledge bases of the disciplines. It is easy to understand how a speech/language therapist with responsibility for a student's articulation therapy may have a very different frame of reference from the adaptive physical educator. The former may work individually with students, diagnosing the speech disability, designing interventions to remediate it, and perhaps delivering services in a one-to-one situation. However, the adaptive physical education specialist may focus on assessing a student's general physical status and then designing a program to maximize the strengths and reduce the deficits of the student. This specialist often will deliver individualized services for the particular student within the group of students served. Similarly, reading specialists are likely to have perspectives that differ in significant ways from those of occupational and physical therapists, administrators will differ from special education teachers, and so on.

Culture and Perspective A wealth of engaging literature on cultural competency and cultural responsiveness offers extensive guidance to education and related professions that is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this book to address. In order to address this dimension of communication, though, the critical topic of cultural perspective—the connection between culture and interpersonal communication—can be explored, starting with Lustig and Koester's (2013) definition of culture:

Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people. (p. 25)

Your cultural perspective is composed of your cultural background, your awareness of it, and how you have internalized it. It also includes your awareness, understanding, and views of others' cultures. In terms of the previous discussions, it can be conceptualized as



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Developing Cultural Self-Awareness

Awareness of your cultural roots is helpful as you strive to develop sensitivity and knowledge of others. Here are some topics you could address with classmates to get started exploring your cultural roots. Think of and describe the following:

- A country (or countries) other than the United States that your family considers its “home” or country of origin
- Holidays or other celebrations your family may celebrate that derive from another country
- Family members who speak the language of their country of origin
- Languages other than English you heard at home while growing up
- A special piece of advice or perhaps a cultural adage that you recall from childhood

- A time growing up when something a parent or grandparent did seemed “old country,” out of place, or embarrassing in school or in front of other children who didn’t share your culture

For a more reflective interaction, discuss the following:

- An observation you made about yourself or others when involved with people from a different culture that shocked or upset you. Describe how you felt and reacted. Upon reflection, do you view it differently now?
- An occasion when you interacted with others from a different culture and did something particularly insensitive and thoughtless that you would now do differently. Describe the situation and your behavior. How do you understand the situation now? Describe how you would respond now.

part of the environment in the transactional model. It is also easily understood as one of the factors that influence what and how you perceive an interaction or another person.

The component in understanding and expanding your cultural perspective of others is achieving cultural self-awareness (Tuleja, 2014). This begins with learning about your own cultural heritage and the values, beliefs, and customs that are identified with it. Scholars have observed that many Anglo-European Americans have less awareness of their cultural influences than do people from other groups, perhaps because the “melting pot” aspirations of early immigrants took a toll on their diversity awareness (Hammond & Morrison, 1996; Lustig & Koester, 2013). Gathering family narratives, reviewing documents, listening with greater interest to family stories, and researching countries of origin enhances knowledge of family backgrounds. Further, it can be instructive to compare your own beliefs with those attributed to your cultural group. In addition, as part of your quest for cultural self-awareness it may be useful to take a few minutes to consider the discussion points in Putting Ideas into Practice.

The second component of cultural perspective is awareness and understanding of others’ cultural perspectives. Whether or not we are immediately aware of it, our cultural backgrounds inform our decisions and provide contexts to our actions that may not be completely visible to others’ perspectives. How we behave during our day-to-day activities reflects, in some ways, composites of many ideologies that construct our identities. Though not the focus of this chapter, a brief overview of some of the cultural patterns that underlie different cultures can provide a strong basis for self-reflection of how we perceive each other.

Of the many taxonomies and continua used to describe cultural values, beliefs, norms, and practices, these three seem especially applicable to educators:

- high-ambiguity-tolerant and low-ambiguity-tolerant cultures
- high- and low-context cultures
- individualist and collectivist orientations

However, any discussion of cultural similarities and differences must be preceded with a strong admonition: *There is no validity in adhering to culture-specific descriptions of cultures.* It is well established that significant variations exist within cultural groups, often based on such factors as gender, age, marital status, and socioeconomic status. Individual members of a group should not be assumed to possess the characteristics attributed to the



Learn More About

What is the message for you as a professional educator in this video snapshot that illustrates communication, perspective, and cultural differences?

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeee9zY1-3U>)

group, nor should any group be considered to exemplify all of the characteristics associated with a continuum.

High-Ambiguity-Tolerant and Low-Ambiguity-Tolerant Cultures Uncertainty is responded to differently in different cultures. In some, it is a normal part of life and people take it in stride. Those are cultures with high ambiguity tolerance. Because the people in those cultures are comfortable with ambiguity and unknown situations, they are tolerant of those who do not follow the rules of the majority culture and may even encourage differences in perspectives (Hofstede, 1997; Kim, Seo, Yu, & Neuendorf, 2014). Examples of high-ambiguity-tolerant cultures are those of Singapore, Denmark, Ireland, India, Malaysia, and the United States.

At the other end of the continuum, people from cultures with low ambiguity tolerance exert great effort to avoid uncertainty. They experience much anxiety in the face of the unknown; not knowing what will happen next is threatening and must be counteracted. Examples of such cultures are those of Guatemala, Greece, Japan, Chile, Spain, and Costa Rica (DeVito, 2015). People from low-ambiguity-tolerant cultures prefer very concrete, specific rules for communication that are not to be violated. They prefer highly structured experiences, detailed instructions, and clear timetables.

High- and Low-Context Cultures In high-context cultures, people prefer to use high-context messages in which most or all of the meaning is implied by the physical setting or assumed to be something already internalized by the individual (Brantley & Miller, 2008). For example, there is a strong emphasis on verbal shorthand or nonverbal codes in communicating information that is known by the communicators but is not explicitly stated in the verbal message; it may be something that was in a previous communication or shared experience. The cultures of Japan, Mexico, and Thailand are considered high-context cultures, whereas Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the United States are viewed as having low-context cultures (DeVito, 2015). In low-context cultures, the information would be explicitly and precisely in the words people use as they communicate.

The case that opened this chapter includes an example of high-context messages. Lena and Kim shared a background of supporting their college basketball team. Lena referred to a key player by name and signaled that she was certain the team would make it to national playoffs when she said, “We’re going to Bloomington!” where the championship games would be held. She emphasized the excitement of the basketball shots nonverbally by pretending to make one herself. Lena’s communication served to illustrate the types of nonverbal cues and verbal codes common in high-context cultures.

Individualist and Collectivist Orientations This continuum represents the emphasis a culture places on individual goals, achievement, and fulfillment versus interdependence and emphasis on the well-being of the group as a whole (Lynch, 2011b; van Hoorn, 2015). In these cultures, an individual’s autonomy, uniqueness, self-realization, and self-expression are highly valued, and people are supposed to take care of only their immediate families and themselves. Key words are I, self, independence, and privacy. Communication styles within the categories of context, talk, directness, and turn-taking and associated with both extremes of the continuum (Watkins & Eatman, 2001) and are outlined in Figure 2.2. Generally, the dominant cultures of Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States are thought to reflect an individualistic orientation. However, about 70 percent of the world’s cultures can be viewed as collectivistic (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, & Garcia, 2009; Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2008). In collectivist cultures—such as those in Guatemala, Indonesia, most U.S. immigrant groups, as well as African American, Native American, and Alaskan Native cultures—the groups to which people belong are the most important social units. Those cultures require loyalty to the group and place value on meeting the needs of the group. In these cultures, the relevant group is likely to extend beyond the nuclear family and be oriented toward the extended family and kinship-help patterns.

Granted, no ethnic or other cultural group is only individualistic or collectivistic in its orientation, and not all members of a cultural group share the same values. Those orientations are used to describe a continuum of values that may help distinguish key beliefs and

FIGURE 2.2 Individualistic and collectivistic influences in intercultural communication.

| Individualistic | Collectivistic |
|--|---|
| <p>Low-context: Explicit and direct communication gets “right to the point.”</p> | <p>High-context: The context, past experiences, and indirect cues are the basis for communication. Parties talk about what they know and have experienced.</p> |
| <p>Talk: One asserts oneself through talk and talk is used to create a sense of comfort in interactions and especially in groups.</p> | <p>Silence: Silence is golden. It is valued and may be used to communicate respect and provide comfort.</p> |
| <p>Directness: Communication with individuality and uniqueness; the intent of opinions is to oppose, disagree, persuade, and make explicit.</p> | <p>Indirectness: Ambiguity is often present. It reveals and is thought of as a means of maintaining harmony. Subtle cues and suggestions are used to maintain harmony.</p> |
| <p>Uneven turn-taking: One person may dominate, but both parties are likely to introduce subjects and talk at length about them. There is no apparent sense of parity or equity in turn-taking.</p> | <p>Balanced turn-taking: Parties take turns in an evenly distributed manner. Turns are short and relinquished so that others may speak. Parties do not shift topics; instead, they are likely to respond to what the other said.</p> |

patterns of groups and individuals. Such a continuum serves as a framework for considering characteristics of cultural styles and patterns that are evident in intercultural communication.

Just as the many aspects of a single culture cannot all be classified as fitting the same place on a given continuum, one continuum cannot be used to describe the central patterns of a culture. Any culture can be found to have a place on each of the three illustrative continua discussed here and on the many others not addressed here.

Now consider a personal application of these orientations: How do your views align with each of the three continua? How do they align with the orientations of others in your professional setting? You will likely find you are more aligned with certain individuals than others—this is one indication of cultural similarities and differences. Those individuals are

probably those with whom you believe you can most easily work collaboratively. However, your efforts to achieve cultural self-awareness can help you begin to expand the range of people to whom you can relate effectively and with whom you can develop culturally competent communication skills that will enhance your collaborative interactions.

In today’s culturally pluralistic and self-conscious society, a temptation exists to try to avert the complexity of cultural differences by ascribing specific cultural values to groups of people who are of the same ethnicity, gender, or age. We hope that the examples of variation in perspective summarized here help you focus on how your perspective—unique because of your personal, professional, and cultural history—is both similar to and different from those of others with whom you may want to collaborate. What is most important to understand is that no two people experience a single interaction in exactly the same way. Your responsibility is to



Eve Edelheit/Tampa Bay Times/ZUMA/PRESS/Alamy Live News

Professionals are more effective in their communication with family members from diverse backgrounds when they are aware of their own cultures and biases and work diligently to understand others’ cultures.

simultaneously be aware of how you are influenced by your own and others' perspectives and how others may dynamically react to yours.

Ethics in Intercultural Communication As you contemplate your cultural roots and their influences, you may also wish to consider some of the ethical considerations that have been identified and how they relate to helping people improve the success of their intercultural communications with those from other backgrounds. Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, and Roy (2013) include these:

1. Respect for others' culture is nonnegotiable, as most would readily agree. However, it is important to realize that a comment you consider innocuous could be disrespectful to a person from another culture. Offhand jokes, even when hastily explained as not meaning anything negative, can significantly reduce your communication competence.
2. Look for areas of commonality that you share with those from other cultures. This is not an effort to minimize differences in cultures nor to diminish the value of each culture's uniqueness. Instead, the goal is to build a foundation for effective communication by looking for ways that we share the human experience.
3. Even as you look for similarities, respect cultural differences. The point is that people are in many ways alike, and in many other ways they are different. This is simply the way it is, and communication is facilitated when each person understands and is comfortable with this status.
4. Accept responsibility for your communication behavior. Whether words or actions, your communication has both intended and unintended consequences, an especially important element in intercultural communication. If you inadvertently offend another person, an apology rather than an explanation that "you didn't mean it" is appropriate.

Each of these ethical components can serve to guide all your communication, not just that occurring in an intercultural context. And one of the best sources to illustrate why these principles are so essential is to simply watch the media for examples of how celebrities and those who experience momentary, sometimes unanticipated, celebrity status frequently violate these ethics, often with unfortunate consequences.

Competent Communication

Having considered perspective, the cognitive dimension of interpersonal competence, and how perception and culture influence perspective, the concept of competent communication now can be directly considered. This is the second major component of interpersonal competence. It is the behavioral dimension that includes the development, adaptation, and adept use of communication skills.

Most definitions of communication competence include two criteria: It is both effective and appropriate (Martin & Nakayama, 2015; Spitzberg, 2000). *Effective* communication is that which achieves the intended outcome or the goals of the specific situation in which it is used. Communication is considered *appropriate* when it is adapted to be proper and suitable to particular situations and people. Noted interpersonal and intercultural communication scholars offer the following definition (Adler et al., 2014; Trenholm, 2014):

Competent communication is effective and appropriate communication that achieves its intended outcomes in ways that maintain or enhance the relationship in which it occurs.

Although you will learn about many aspects of communication and interaction skills throughout the remainder of this book and in the course you are taking, the following four factors are overviewed as central to the development of communication competence. The discrete skills and the skills embedded within interaction processes are explored in depth in other chapters. In *A Basis in Research* you can see how communication competence is studied and how it affects the outcomes of professional interactions.

 **Learn More About**
Each of these humorous vignettes has a serious meaning about fostering effective communication and avoiding ineffective communication behaviors.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypquQYbilyU>)



A BASIS IN RESEARCH

Competent Communication and School Principals

Although school professionals may strongly believe that they have exemplary communication skills, research suggests that this may not be the case, especially in the context of challenging interactions. For example, Le Fevre and Robinson (2015) asked principals to meet with an actor portraying a teacher about whom a parent had made a complaint (the parent claimed the teacher was picking on a fictional child and threatened to go to the school board). The interactions were video recorded, and the principals were rated using a validated instrument on the extent to which they demonstrated six critical communication skills:

1. Presenting a point of view based on some type of specific evidence
2. Being able to explore the other person's reasoning about, and interpretation of, the problem
3. Checking understanding of the other's point of view
4. Assisting the other person to consider alternative meanings or explanations for the problem
5. Demonstrating a willingness to self-reflect, to question his or her own assumptions and beliefs
6. Working to plan the next steps for addressing the problem

The authors found that the principals, overall, demonstrated skills that were low to moderate across the six skill areas. They were particularly prone to describing their own points of view, but without providing evidence to support those views. They generally did not work to better understand the perspective of the teacher who had been accused of treating a student unfairly, nor did they consistently check the accuracy of their understanding of the teacher's perspective. Perhaps most notably, the principals were not skilled in challenging statements made by the teacher in order to help the teacher understand the parent's point of view. These results were consistent despite the fact that the principals were at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels and had a wide range of educational experiences.

Principals generally are more experienced, have education specific to their roles as school leaders, and are charged with a wide range of communication responsibilities. If they have difficulties with effective communication, what does it suggest about teachers, paraprofessionals, related services providers, and others? What steps could you take as a professional educator to continue to refine your own communication skills?

Develop a Skills Repertoire Effective communicators must develop and be able to use a large range of communication skills. No single style of communication is effective in pursuing all goals or for interacting with all people in all situations. They must also be able to perform the skills. Simply reading about communication skills or even insisting that you already know them, will not be of much help unless you can put them to work. This is the reason for the end-of-chapter activities throughout this text; they are intended to assist you to explore your communication skills repertoire and to expand it. As a starting point, completing the self-assessments in this chapter and in Chapter 3 can help you to know whether your skills are as broad and well developed as you would like.

Choose and Adapt Behavior Having a variety of communication skills is a necessary but not a sufficient requirement for successful communication. Knowing what to do in specific instances is also important because a response that works well in one setting could be less successful in another. For example, knowing whether being deferential, direct, or humorous is likely to have a positive or negative influence in a given situation or when pursuing a particular goal. Appropriately adapted communication is sensitive to context (situation, time, and place), goals, and uniqueness of communicators (e.g., your audience is elderly, youthful, family, community).

Watch Yourself! You learn to understand others better with increased perspective-taking skills, but competent communicators focus on better understanding themselves as well. They employ self-monitoring to pay close attention to their own behavior and use these observations to change their behaviors. Monitoring occurs both before and during an interaction. Before talking with someone who recently expressed much unwarranted anger toward you and complained to the principal, you remind yourself not to get defensive and

to avoid getting pulled into an argument. During the interaction, you stay alert and catch yourself if the person says something hurtful and you want to snap back with something equally so. In short, people who are aware of their behavior and the impression it makes are more skillful communicators than people who do not exercise self-monitoring.

Communicate Ethically with Others as Unique Individuals Competent communicators are committed to interacting effectively and ethically. They demonstrate this commitment in two ways. First, their commitment to the other person is evident. It is seen in their interest in the person's thoughts, ideas, and feelings; their desire is to spend time together; and their willingness to listen rather than talk all the time. All of this reveals their investment in the other person. The second way competent communicators demonstrate their commitment to effective and ethical communication is in their concern that the message is accurate, understandable, and understood. Their ethical commitment is reflected in their steadfast understanding of others as unique human beings, not simply as members of a particular category or a particular type of person.

Suggestions for Improving Your Communication Skills

Now that you have focused your methods and intentions to communicate competently with others, the next step requires that you mindfully seek to improve and refine your skills. Naturally, you may be wondering how to best begin honing them. It is a journey and one that takes practice. Some basic steps to help you refine your verbal and nonverbal communication skills include the following.

Become a Student of Communication Because communication is the smallest unit of concern in interactions and comprises the most basic set of skills needed in collaborative activities, you should study and become a highly skillful communicator. A note of caution is warranted, however. Like most people, you may conclude that you already have a high degree of communication skill, because you communicate regularly in your professional and personal life. “Practice makes perfect,” right? As you read about the skills in this and the following chapters, you may believe you have “had that course” or acquired the skills elsewhere. Keep these two points in mind: First, understanding or being aware of communication skills alone does not improve your communication. Only through self-reflection and continuing practice does improvement occur. Our students repeatedly share with us that focusing on and rehearsing the skills is somewhat humbling; implementing the skills is much more difficult than simply recognizing them. Second, regardless of your knowledge or proficiency level after much practice, you will never fully master communication, because each new person, interaction, and situation will require you to practice and refine your skills further. As all professionals teach and learn from one another, interactions are enhanced by being open to opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills. Communication competence is truly an example of lifelong learning.

Nurture and Communicate Openness Perhaps the most pronounced theme that runs throughout the discipline of collaboration is an absolutely essential requirement for openness. Openness refers to a person's ability to suspend or eliminate judgment and evaluation of information and situations until he or she has explored adequately the various potential meanings and explanations. For example, when emergent characteristics of collaboration were discussed in Chapter 1, it was noted that in order to collaborate, individuals should value joint decision making or at least be willing to experiment with it. In the perspective-taking exercises at the end of this chapter, you can practice and expand your openness to alternative meanings. In Chapter 5, the importance of exploring problems to avoid formulating hasty and inaccurate problem statements is stressed.

Hopefully, the importance of an attitude of openness has become very clear to you. Openness, in the context of verbal communication, is similar to the earlier caution to avoid drawing conclusions early, but the focus in that discussion was on eliminating judgments about people rather than deferring judgments about situations. In this context, the point is

for you to set aside your biases and explore various aspects of a situation before attempting to decipher the message. As you think of examples when this application of openness could facilitate or impede your interactions? With a colleague? A paraprofessional? A parent?

Keep Communication Meaningful People will invest more in communication when they believe the information shared will be meaningful to them. Conversely, you (and others) are unlikely to invest significantly in communication pertaining to topics or information in which you are not interested or that you do not see as important. If you do not share a friend's interest in knitting, you probably will not make a significant effort to engage in discussion about it.

The amount of information being communicated influences perceptions of the meaningfulness of communication. Too much or too little information is not meaningful. Have you had the experience of asking a colleague or coworker a simple question, such as, "How is the new student adjusting?" and getting a diatribe with more information than you ever wanted to know about the situation? You may have asked the question in passing or out of general interest and started a verbal landslide. You probably know a number of people who tend to give such lengthy responses. Do you try to avoid giving them an opening to speak? This, or simply "tuning out," is a common response to such highly talkative people. Conversely, have you ever found yourself providing too much information to others? As you observe your own communication, you may find that you sometimes obscure the meaning of what you are trying to communicate by doing this.

Alternatively, everyone experiences exchanges in which too little information is shared. You may have had experiences trying to communicate with someone who seems to expect you to be a mind reader. If so, you know how difficult it can be to ensure clear understanding when others withhold needed information and how easily such interaction can become difficult, as this example illustrates:

Zoe, a first-year special educator, is touching base with Mary Jo, the 15-year veteran paraprofessional providing support for Jake in his 7th-grade general education classes. She asks, "Did you implement all the steps in the note-taking procedure that Jake has been learning?" Mary Jo responds, "Yes, I did that." Zoe continues, "How accurately did he complete each step?" to which Mary Jo replies, "He's doing fine." Slightly frustrated, Zoe says, "I really need more information so I can decide if it's time to begin helping Jake to complete note-taking without so much support." Mary Jo, speaking a bit louder now and staring at Zoe, states, "Don't you trust me to do my job?"

As you reflect on this unfortunate interaction, what could Zoe and Mary Jo have done differently to improve their communication by sharing the appropriate amount of information?

As you work toward effective interpersonal communication, you should ensure that communication is meaningful by judging what and how much information the people with whom you are interacting want to have. When you want information from others, you may find that they give you too little or too much information. Your task then is either to work to obtain more information or to focus and narrow the information they are supplying. Putting Ideas into Practice summarizes additional information to assist you in keeping communication meaningful.

Use Silence Effectively Silence and pauses are important nonverbal behaviors that are related to speech flow and pace, and they may be used as minimal encouragers. However, beyond these uses, silence is an extremely powerful communication tool in its own right. You are undoubtedly familiar with the "deadly silence" used by parents and teachers to communicate disapproval to children. You may have even used it or experienced it yourself in adult relationships. Surely, silence can be awkward or seem punishing in conversations, but few people seem to understand how powerful it is in communicating interest, concern, empathy, and respect to others. It also has another advantage as a very helpful communication strategy because it allows others to pause and think through their communication, thus enhancing the quality and meaning of their messages.

The definition of *silence* in communication is the absence of verbal noise or talk. But how long must there be no talk before a space in the talk can be considered silence?



PUTTING IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Planning for and Evaluating a Communication Event

Becoming a proficient communicator requires awareness of and attention to the factors that influence communication. As a student of communication, you should give advance thought to factors that will make your task easier or more difficult. In addition to the suggestions offered throughout this chapter, try to also include the following:

- *Establish your communication goal.* Identify ahead of time what information you want to share, obtain, or explore in this interaction.
- *Identify the most appropriate setting in which to accomplish this goal.* Think about such things as privacy, convenience of location, and access to materials or resources that may be needed.
- *Consider the potential message-to-noise ratio.* It is impossible to eliminate all noise or communication

interference, but you can and should work to minimize its effects on your interaction.

- *Evaluate the message and think about how the channel(s) to be used might affect the communication.* Assess the amount of information to be conveyed, your desired control over how the message is composed, your desired control over the receiver's attention, your ability to assess the other's understanding, and how quickly you need feedback. These elements should help you determine the most appropriate channel(s) for meeting your communication goal.

After the interaction, assess your success in attaining your communication goal. Write a summary of your colleague's primary points and concerns. Summarize your listening behaviors, and decide which were most and least useful in accomplishing your listening goal.

Goodman (1978, 1984) offers several concepts that help to clarify this. He suggests that the length of time between two speakers' verbal expressions varies within each conversation, and the amount of silent time that qualifies as a "silence response" is dependent on each conversation's tempo and patterns of speech. For example, if two people exchange several comments and pause for about one and a half seconds after each speaker completes a thought and before another starts, then a pause of two or three seconds may be required for a silence response. On the other hand, if two people are talking but only allowing about a quarter of a second of verbal space between taking turns to talk, one second may constitute a silence response.

Silence and its contributions to communication are more easily understood when you consider the alternatives: interruptions, overtalk, and reduced verbal spacing. Interruptions occur when one speaker disrupts another's message in order to deliver his or her own. When someone is speaking and another interrupts, there is a period of overtalk in which both speakers are talking at the same time until one relinquishes the conversation to the other. The final alternative, reduced verbal spacing, is related to, but distinct from, silence and pauses. It refers to the pace of the turn-taking in verbal interaction. It occurs when a new speaker begins talking during what is meant to be a brief pause in someone else's speech. In its most exaggerated form, one speaker appears to clip off the last word or two of the previous speaker's talk.

Several similarities characterize interruptions, overtalk, and reduced verbal spacing. Perhaps they occur because the person using them has a need to control the situation, to demonstrate knowledge, to try to reduce the speaker's rambling talk, or simply to be the center of attention. Whatever the reason, these responses are likely to have a negative impact on the conversation and relationship. They seem to say, "Listen to me," "It's my turn," or "What I have to say has more value than what you're saying." Those responses certainly suggest to the other person that he or she is less competent, less important, or less interesting than the person attempting to take control of the conversation. They are likely to produce frustration and sometimes anger as the person who is verbally "crowded" feels less and less understood and valued.

In your interactions, try to develop a habit of protecting verbal space. It will give the other person the opportunity to finish talking and give you the opportunity to consider what the other has said and how you want to respond. In addition to avoiding verbal crowding, the silence response or verbal space conveys that you are interested in the other's comments and are taking the time to comprehend the message before responding.

A final point to consider is that the amount of silent space that creates the positive impact you desire varies with each conversational pair. Analogous to inadequate silence, unnaturally long periods of silence can convey disinterest or other negative messages. There are no precise rules about verbal spacing. Sometimes, in a fast-paced discussion, three seconds is a significant silence. At other times, particularly if the topic is emotional and one or more speakers are describing personal feelings, silences of several seconds or more than a minute may be appropriate nonverbal cues. Through experimentation you can learn to determine the desirable amounts of silence in each relationship and conversation within that relationship.

Adapt Your Communication to Match the Task and the Relationship Ultimately, effective communicators tend to adapt their communication according to the task, the relationship, and the characteristics of the individuals involved. They choose clear and efficient language, identify the information that is needed, and use verbal communication strategies that will best elicit their preferred responses. The nature of the desired responses and relationships and their levels of development should influence your choice of communication style. Simply, if you think about the individuals with whom you interact, you will probably include colleagues, administrators, parents, paraeducators, and professionals from other agencies. And you may further differentiate ongoing and regular relationships from more temporary and infrequent interactions, such as those in annual review meetings. The nature of your relationship and its level of development should influence your choice of the communication style. As you collaborate in established or developing relationships, one of your responsibilities is to use communication strategies that will best facilitate the collaborative activity. Because there are no simple rules or strategies for adapting your verbal communication, your ability to understand the principles and learn to use many of the skills included in this book can help you do this.



APPLY YOUR KNOWLEDGE

2.3

SUMMARY

- Competent interpersonal communication is the basis for successful collaboration. Of the three primary models of communication, transactional, which includes simultaneous and ongoing communication, is considered most applicable to professional interactions, more so than linear or interactional models.
- Interpersonal communication is a transactional process by which communicators continuously and simultaneously exchange messages through multiple channels in order to create shared meanings. It is premised on the understanding that communication is unavoidable, irreversible, comprised of both content and relational dimensions, and learned.
- Interpersonally competent individuals have sophisticated perspective-taking skills. They continually work toward accurate perception and increased intercultural awareness, grounded in understanding their own and others' perspectives and how these have been shaped by past experiences, professional preparation, and cultural identity. These individuals also use appropriate communication skills suitable to the persons and situations involved and are effective in achieving communication goals.

BACK TO THE CASE

1. Think about the initial exchange between Kim and Lena. What channels were being used in their cafeteria communication? Which were most effective? Least effective? Why?
2. How does Kim and Lena's interaction illustrate transactional communication? One way to do this is to imagine they had communicated through e-mail, an interactional approach, and with a classmate, to construct their e-mail exchange. How might an e-mail interaction have been better or worse? Relate your answers to the type of communication approach employed.

3. Apply the communication concept of perspective to this interaction. With a classmate, take on the roles of Kim and Lena. Using *your* perspective as a basis, write at least three or four paragraphs about what you're thinking before, during, and immediately after the interaction. Then attribute your comments to an element of your perspective (e.g., your parents' messages to you

as a child, other childhood or school experiences, your professional preparation, your culture, your professional experiences). In what ways is your perspective similar to/different from that of your partner? Which elements most strongly shaped your perspective? What does this tell you about your communication with colleagues and parents in an educational setting?

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

1. As a way to practice considering alternative meanings and differing points of view, try to generate four distinctly different possible meanings for each of the following statements. Get additional practice by doing the same for statements made by others in the course of conversations during the next few days.

Teacher: I'm all for accountability. Let's start with the school board and their accountability for our working conditions! Then the administration—shouldn't they be accountable for us having books, supplies, and building maintenance? And then the *Times*—is it accountable for reporting about conditions as well as our individual value-added scores?

Parent: We do everything we can to protect Bobby. I bring him to school and pick him up as soon as school is out. He is in safe after-school clubs. But when he's with you, he can't even go to the restroom without getting bullied or beaten up or threatened!

Speech Therapist: I haven't had any teaching courses or professorial development about group instruction. How am I going to be able to provide Jill's speech services in her general education classroom?

2. No doubt you communicate with colleagues and/or parents using notes and e-mail, or forms that you have created or that have been created by colleagues or the school district. Collect a sample of teacher- or district-developed forms and share them with colleagues from other settings. Work together to identify ways in which the forms could be made more teacher or parent friendly, and modify the forms accordingly. Note that when you do this with classmates from other districts or settings, you are likely to get many more new ideas and time-saving strategies than if you simply exchange with colleagues who share your setting.
3. "It is well known that people don't always 'speak their minds,' and it is suspected that people don't always 'know their minds.'" Harvard University's Project

Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo>), the source of this quote, presents a method that demonstrates the conscious–unconscious divergences much more convincingly than has been possible with previous methods. Learn about the method, and take a short confidential assessment by visiting the web site. Consider taking two different assessments and comparing results.

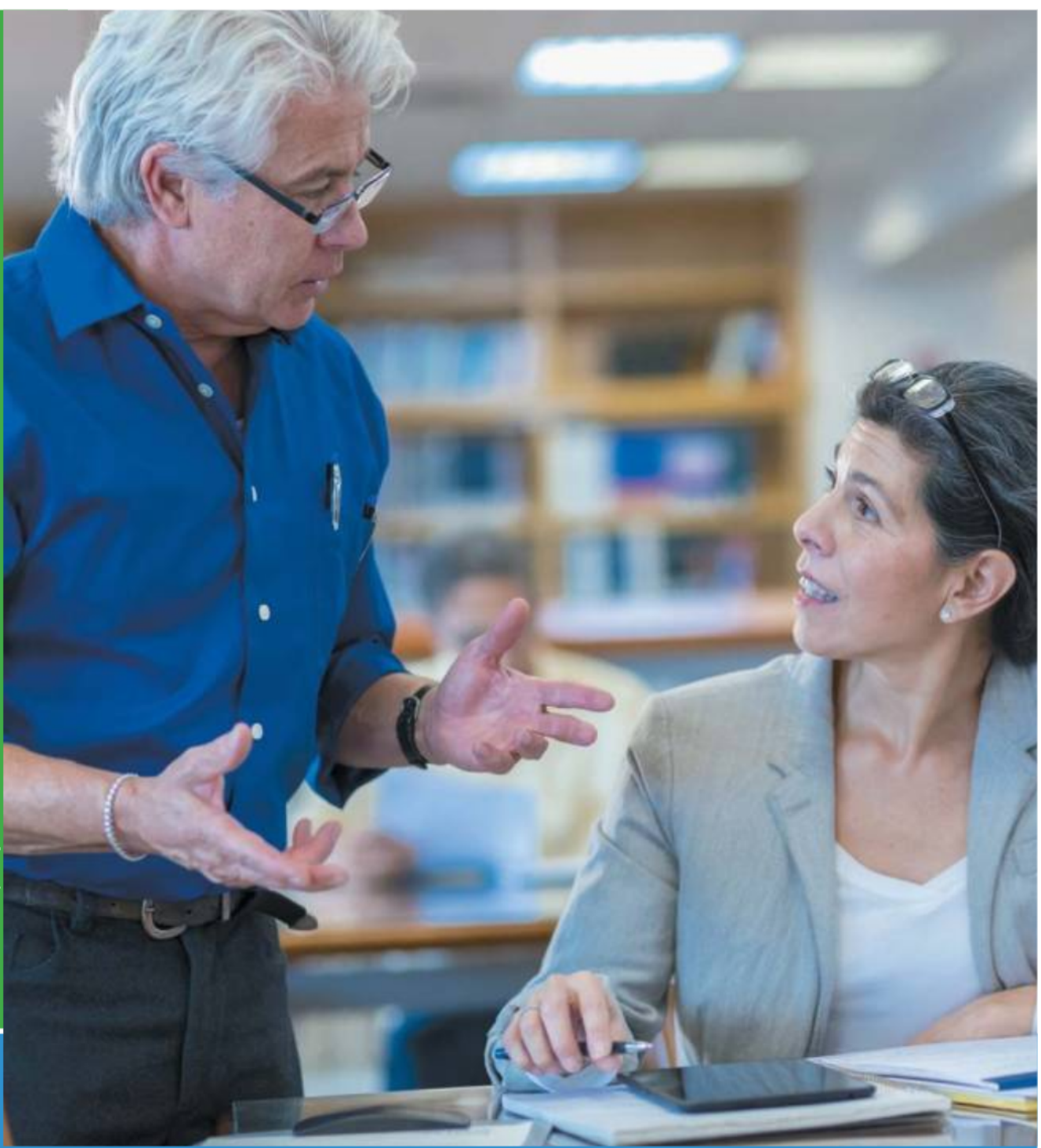
4. Because culture affects communication, begin a search for your cultural roots. For example, ask the oldest family members for their recollections. Perhaps they have journals, photo albums, notes of important events, old letters, or any number of things that provide information about your family traditions. When this information is not available, with a bit of effort you can use document searches in courthouses to uncover marriage records, deeds, and birth certificates. As genealogy has become increasingly popular, online services have made such information accessible as well. What have you found that is surprising? What is there in your cultural roots that could affect your communication with others?
5. Identify a classmate or colleague with whom you seemingly have many differences and do the following:
 - Individually, compile a short list of three or four differences that you believe both of you might consider as the primary distinctions between you. These differences might be your philosophies, ideologies, most valued relationships (e.g., friends, family, spouse, or significant other), views of success, and so on.
 - In order to reflect on how we all ascribe certain meanings to the differences we perceive in others, compare your lists to see which items, if any, you agreed were your areas of greatest difference.
 - Then, take turns speculating about why your greatest differences exist. The more you clarify these differences and the possible reasons for them, the more you will be drawn to reconsider the impressions that you have of each other and, perhaps more importantly, why you formed those impressions.



CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Click here to gauge your understanding of this chapter's essential concepts.

Marc Romanelli/Getty Images



3 Listening, Responding, and Giving Feedback

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