Communicating in Groups

**Curtis walks for his wife. Danielle walks for her mother. Lynette walks for herself. And** Cindy walks for her young granddaughter in the hope that she'll never hear the four terrifying words that changed Cindy's life forever: "You have breast cancer."

Every year, the organization Susan G. Komen for the Cure plans "3-Day," sixty-mile walks to raise funds for breast cancer all over the United States—from Philadelphia to Dallas to San Francisco. Individuals are required to raise a minimum of $2,300 to participate, and they must devote a significant amount of time to training (mentally and physically) for the challenge of the walk.

Sounds overwhelming, doesn't it? And yet thousands of men and women (over 220,000 since 2003) gladly devote their time and effort to participate ("Susan G. Komen," 2011a). They host bake sales and car washes and join with others to plan larger events—like fashion shows and golf tournaments—to raise money. They find support from virtual personal trainers and volunteer training walks as they prepare their bodies for the challenge. And let's not forget the power of the Internet! Susan G. Komen for the Cure hosts online forums so that participants have a virtual space to encourage and support one another, before and after the walk.

By the time the 3-Day for the Cure weekends arrive, participants know that they are enveloped in a group more powerful than any individual. They are members of a community that shares goals, drive, and, quite often, the experience of being touched by breast cancer, either personally or through the struggle of a loved one. As one participant noted, "The reason we get together might be sad, but when we're together [it's about] sisterhood, and family, and teamwork that I really haven't experienced anywhere else" ("Susan G. Komen," 2011b). And that teamwork certainly comes in handy when rain pours down, calves get sore, blisters form, and ice packs just aren't enough. Anywhere a participant looks is a fellow teammate ready to point out their shared commitment: "Sixty miles, I can do that."

PARTICIPANTS in the Susan G. Komen 3-Day for the Cure rely on one another more than anything else to walk a full sixty miles and stand up against breast cancer.
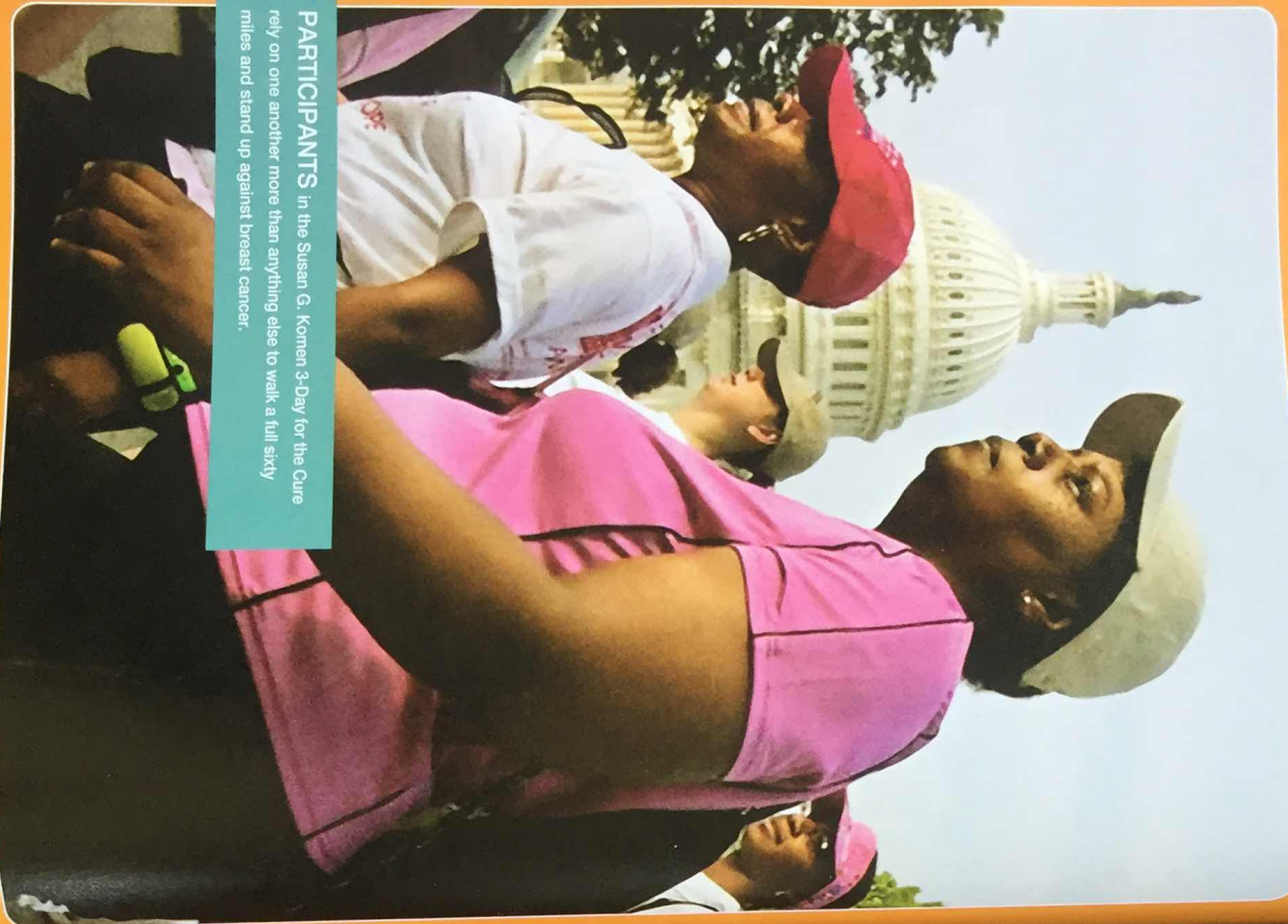
After you have finished reading this chapter, you will be able to

- List the characteristics and types of groups and explain how groups develop

- Describe ways in which group size affects communication

- Identify the influence of networks in groups

- Define the roles individuals play in a group

- Identify key issues affecting group communication and effectiveness

A s you will recall from earlier chapters, communication between two individuals (a dyad) is far more complicated than many of us assume. In a dyad, both participants simultaneously deliver, receive, and interpret messages presented through verbal and nonverbal means—and these messages can be misunderstood in light of perceptual differences or faulty listening. So consider how much more complex things can get when you add more people to the communication scenario! When three or more people come together, their interactions and relationships—and their communication—take on new characteristics, as you can see in our discussion of the 3-Day for the Cure walks. In this chapter, we'll learn more about group communication, how groups operate, and the factors that influence their communication.

Understanding Groups

Your family sitting down to dinner. Ten adults on a bus to Cleveland, Ohio. Your fraternity or sorority at an event. A group of coworkers sitting down for a drink at the end of a shift. Six exasperated parents sitting in a doctor's office with sick kids. Each of these examples involves multiple people (sometimes crowds of people) engaged in some activity—and most of us would probably say that these are examples of "groups of people." But are they really groups? We'll explore what it actually means to be in a group, in addition to understanding what types of groups exist and how those groups develop in the first place.

Characteristics of Groups

For our purposes, a **group** is a collection of more than two people who share some kind of relationship, communicate in an interdependent fashion, and collaborate toward some shared purpose. When we break that definition down, we can identify three key characteristics that make a group something other than just a collection of individuals:

- *A shared identity.* Members of a group perceive themselves as a group. That is, they share a sense of identity with other members of the group: they recognize other members of the group, have specific feelings toward those individuals, and experience a sense of belonging in the group. Thus, a variety of people who identify themselves as part of a group (political parties, for example, or fan organizations) are as much a group as a baseball team or a string quartet.

- *Common goals.* Members of a group usually identify with one another because they have one or more goals in common. Goals may be very specific—coming up with an ad campaign for a new project or organizing a mission trip for a congregation—or they might be quite general, such as socializing or discussing books or films. In either case, a shared sense of purpose helps define a group, even when there is some disagreement about specific goals or ways of achieving them.

- *Interdependent relationships.* Members of a group are connected to one another and communicate in an interdependent way. Simply put, the behavior

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of each member affects the behavior of every other member. This interdependence is fostered by the way that group members adopt specific roles and collaborate to accomplish goals. These goals might be very specific (completing a specific task) or very general (socializing).

Looking back at the examples that we opened this section with, you can probably guess that your family, your sorority or fraternity, and your pals at work constitute a group. You share an identity with the other members and have feelings about them (for better or worse); you likely have common goals, and you are interdependent—that is, you rely on them, and they on you, for love, friendship, or professional growth. This is not the case with the strangers on a bus to Cleveland. They might share a goal (getting to their destination), but they are not interdependent, and they do not share an identity. The same point can be made for the parents waiting in the office of the pediatrician.

Size and proximity were once major factors in group creation, but the case with which modern technology allows individuals to communicate with others means that these factors are no longer as relevant to group formation as they once were. Four friends chatting over coffee at your local Starbucks constitute a group; so do twenty individual photographers who've never met but who contribute to a group photo pool on Flickr. In both cases, the individuals are joined by shared goals, shared identity, and interdependence; these three key factors—not size or proximity—determine group status. Of course, not all groups are alike. Let's take a look at different types of groups.

Group Types

Groups can take many forms. The most common among them are called **primary groups**—long-lasting groups that form around the relationships that mean the most to their members. Your family constitutes one primary group to which you belong; your friends are another.

In addition to primary groups, there are groups defined by their specific functions (for instance, support groups, study groups, and social groups). However, any one of these groups can perform multiple functions. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for example, is primarily a **support group**—a set of individuals who come together to address personal problems while benefiting from the support of others with similar issues. But AA is also a **social group**, as membership in the group offers opportunities to form relationships with others. And finally, as a group with a specific mission—to help members manage their struggles with alcohol and addiction—AA is also a **problem-solving group**.

While all groups are to some degree social, some groups are more task-oriented than others. **Study groups**, for example, are formed for the specific purpose of helping students prepare for exams. A **focus group** is a set of individuals asked by a researcher to come together to give their opinions on a specific issue (Frantz, 2007; Sinickas, 2000). For example, when a new TV pilot

AND YOU?

In Chapter 7, we talked about family as an example of interpersonal relationships. Now think about your family as a group. What are the family's common goals? What do the members of your family see as the family's defining traits? How can a change in behavior by one family member affect other members?

is getting ready to air, a network will assemble a focus group to gauge how the public might respond to the pilot.

Perhaps the most task-oriented and goal-driven type of group is the **team**—a group that works together to carry out a project or a specific endeavor or to compete against other teams. Sports teams are an obvious example, but teams are also common in large organizations or as subsets of other groups: an Army unit

WIREDFORCOMMUNICATION

From Group to Smart Mob

In 2011, demonstrations rocked Cairo, Egypt, as young people organized protests to demand political change. In 2010, a seemingly random crowd of shoppers in Bristol, in the United Kingdom, suddenly erupted into an epic lightsaber battle that lasted for two and a half minutes, then ended just as quickly.

What do these two stories have in common? They're both examples of smart mobs or large groups of individuals who act in concert, even though they don't know each other, and who connect and cooperate with one another, at least initially, via electronically mediated means (Rheingold, 2002). Smart mobs were first identified in 2001, when calls for protest in the Philippines spread via text message, gathering more than a million people to a nonviolent demonstration in Manila within four days. Largely hailed as the world's first "e-revolution," the Manila protests quickly and peacefully brought about the resignation of President Joseph Estrada. While the revolution itself was, of course, grounded in frustrations that had been building for many years, social media provided a key tool in organizing these protests and fueling their momentum. In the years since, as electronic devices have become even cheaper and more available, smart mobs have emerged as a fairly common form of group behavior.

Like all electronic social networks, smart mobs are grounded in a shared desire for communication and rely on affordable devices that offer instantaneous communication. But smart mobs have two important additional characteristics that a generic social network lacks: a shared goal and a finite time frame (Harmon & Metaxas, 2010). Simply communicating is not enough to make a smart mob—there must be a tangible goal (be it a flash mob dance-off at a shopping mall or a carefully orchestrated political protest on the steps of a national capitol) that is organized via mediated communication and achieved quickly and effectively.

Traditional groups and organizations recognize the efficiency and immediacy of smart mobs, and make use of social networks to encourage smart mob behaviors in order to meet specific goals. For example, in 2010, the humanitarian group Oxfam used its existing social network to encourage members and nonmembers alike to donate to money for immediate relief. By mobilizing donors in this manner, the group was able to meet its fundraising goal of $100 million in immediate aid to earthquake-stricken Haiti in just five weeks.

❶ Many social movements benefit from social networks, but is it fair to credit electronic communication with bringing about social change? How did groups like the American civil rights movement organize demonstrations, and how did their demonstrations differ from modern smart mobs?

❷ In an effort to quell the uprisings in Egypt in 2011, the Egyptian government blocked citizens' access to the Internet, yet protests continued. What does this say about the pervasive nature of electronic communication? What does it say about the role of electronic communication in causing and fueling action?

❸ Have you ever witnessed the beginning tremors of a smart mob in any of the social networks of which you are a part? What kinds of goals might motivate you to join a smart mob?

● **GROUPS COME** in all shapes and sizes. While the design team from *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* and a hip-hop dance crew might vary in size and purpose, they are both considered groups.

might select a few members to form a reconnaissance team; a community group might nominate a team of individuals to take charge of its annual fundraiser.

One of the more noteworthy types of groups in today's organizations is the **self-directed work team**, a group of skilled workers who take responsibility for producing high-quality finished work (Douglas, 2002). In self-directed work teams, members bring complementary skills and experiences that enable the team to accomplish more than any individual member could achieve independently (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). Self-directed work teams have proliferated in the last few decades in a variety of organizations and industries (Beyerlein, 2001; Yandrick, 2001).

In self-directed work teams, many typical management functions are completely controlled by the team members. For example, members arrange their own schedules, buy their own equipment, and set their own standards for productivity, quality, and costs. They conduct their own peer evaluations, bring in new members, and coordinate future plans with management. The theory is that when people have more control over their work, they have a more positive attitude and are more committed to the group.

Perhaps the most dramatic impact of self-directed teams is the improved performance and behavior of employees throughout the organization. In enterprises characterized by self-directed teams, the environment is marked by cooperation rather than competition. (See Table 9.1 on p. 256 for tips on working in a self-directed work team.)

Of course, the lessons of self-directed work teams extend far beyond work situations. Collaborative software programs (most commonly known as open-source pages or wikis) allow many individuals to collaborate on a written project, creating, editing, and linking content and reviewing the work of others.

In your first job out of college, do you think you would prefer to work as part of a self-directed work team or in a more traditionally arranged team where a manager takes control? What would be the advantages of each?

TABLE 9.1
SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS: TIPS FOR WORKING COLLABORATIVELY

Action	Considerations
Define a clear purpose for the team	What are the team's goals—short term and long term?
Foster team spirit	Build a sense of energy, excitement, and commitment in your team by engaging in team-building activities and events, rewarding members who demonstrate commitment, and identifying new challenges for the team to take on.
Train	Working on a self-directed team may be a new experience for some members. See if your organization can provide training to help members understand and implement the defining practices of self-directed teams.
Clarify expectations	Make sure all members of the team understand what's expected of them in terms of their roles and performance. For example, what functions will each member serve? How, specifically, will the team define "success"?
Set boundaries	Articulate where the team's responsibilities begin and end. If necessary, remind members that they are working in the service of the organization and that they need to stay focused on their specific purpose.

Sources: Capozzoli (2002); Nelson (2002); Rosenthal (2001).

CONNECT

Beginning a relationship with a group isn't so different from starting a new interpersonal relationship. In both contexts, we reduce uncertainty about our relational partners so that we feel secure and confident about roles, interactions, and so on. So whether you're beginning a new romance or forging a new student organization, try the passive, active, and interactive strategies that we discuss in Chapter 7

Group Development

If you've ever become wrapped up in a reality TV show such as *Survivor*, *The Biggest Loser*, or *Top Chef*, you know how fascinating and dramatic group interactions can be. In each of these shows, a season typically opens with the forming of a group: cast members always start off as strangers but are quickly thrust into a group situation—sharing a living space and working together to accomplish certain tasks. As the season progresses, the group members bond, conflicts erupt, and alliances are forged and reforged. In fact, much of the drama in reality television stems from the tensions that arise between cast members as they struggle to work with—or against—one another. Contestants on *Survivor*, for example, must team up to work on certain challenges, such acquiring food, building shelter, completing an obstacle course, or solving a puzzle. Of course, these "reality" shows are often manipulated—contestants are selected at least in part for their TV "presence," and scenes are edited to heighten the drama. But the shows do reflect some basic truths about how groups develop (Wheelan, 1994). Research shows that as a group progresses, it goes through five specific stages, memorably called forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). Using *Survivor* as an extended example, let's take a look at each stage.

Forming

When a group first comes together, its members are unsure how to act around one another, are nervous about how others perceive them, and aren't clear on what roles they'll be playing within the group. In this **forming** stage, group members try to negotiate who will be in charge and what the group's goals will be. The primary purpose of this stage is for group members to make friends,

come to a point where they feel that they "fit in," and learn more about one another and the group's objectives. Once individuals feel accepted, they can begin to identify with the group (Moreland & Levine, 1994). On *Survivor*, contestants are initially divided into two groups or "tribes." Contestants don't usually have much say regarding which tribe they'll become a part of; they might be randomly selected or assigned to a tribe based on factors like gender (seasons 6 and 9), age (season 21), or even race (season 13). Almost immediately, tribe members begin sizing up their competition—making judgments about one another's strengths, weaknesses, trustworthiness, and likeability.

Storming

After forming, group members move into the **storming** stage, in which they inevitably begin experiencing conflicts over issues such as who will lead the group and what roles members will play. On *Survivor*, a tribe member who shows prowess in gathering food or making fire, for example, will become valued, while members who seem weak are not. This process is shown in harsh relief as tribe members continually assess each of their fellow contestants during periodic "tribal councils." Group members who are a detriment to the groups' goals—or who pose a threat to individual goals—are voted off.

● ON SURVIVOR:
NICARAGUA, Shannon quickly decides that teammate Jud is a "dumb blond" and dubs him "Fabio." The nickname sticks, but not the impression: "Fabio" is the last survivor standing and wins the million-dollar prize.

Norming

During the **norming** stage, norms emerge among members that govern expected behavior. **Norms** are recurring patterns of behavior or thinking that come to be accepted in a group as the "usual" way of doing things (Scheerhorn & Geist, 1997). During this stage, group roles also solidify, and a leader emerges. On *Survivor*, some tribe members take on leadership roles or present themselves as likeable heroes (like Rupert Boneham, season 7) or ambitious villains (like Richard Hatch, season 1); other contestants draw on specific strengths (such as physical prowess or fishing expertise) to make themselves invaluable to their fellow tribe members. In addition, group identity grows stronger as members begin to realize the importance of their roles within the group and the need to cooperate to accomplish goals.

Performing

Once the group has established norms, the action shifts to accomplishing tasks. During the **performing** stage, members combine their skills and knowledge to work toward the group's goals and overcome hurdles. On *Survivor*, tribemates work together on group challenges, such as building a shelter for the tribe. They might also endeavor to work together on physical challenges to earn rewards for the tribe.

Adjourning

Many groups—though clearly not all—eventually disband. For groups whose project or task has come to an end, there is an **adjourning** stage. The group members reflect on their accomplishments and failures as well as determine

whether the group will disassemble or take on another project. To mark this stage, some groups hold a celebratory dinner or simply say thank you and good-bye. Alternatively, some groups may decide to continue to work together on new tasks. Members may also opt to maintain friendships even if they will no longer be working together.

real communicator

NAME: Stephanie Lam
HOMETOWN: Hong Kong, China
OCCUPATION: Youth trainer
FUN FACT: My dream is to watch my favorite soccer team, Chelsea, play at their headquarters in Stamford Bridge, England.

I work at the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG), an organization dedicated to developing a pool of young leadership talent for the future of Hong Kong. Specifically, I am a professional trainer in youth team building. We use experiential learning at the HKFYG. I don't teach students in a traditional, lecture-style delivery. Instead, the students gain experience on their own, in groups. We are trained to help these groups teach themselves, to develop their own perceptions about a concept. For example, a couple of years ago, we sent twenty-five kids to South Africa for the Cathay Pacific International Wilderness Experience. The overriding aim was to have students learn about the environment, which is important for them as future decision makers.

My first job was to get these twenty students to think of themselves as more than just a collection of individuals. They needed to think of themselves as a team, a group that must work together to solve problems and accomplish goals. To do that, I concentrated a lot of my energy on the formation stage of group development. Building initial rapport and fostering team spirit are vital to a group's future success. In South Africa, the kids were encouraged to have a giant mud fight with one another (not that they needed much encouragement). It brought them closer to nature and to one another. It got the students enthusiastic, and an enthusiastic group is a more cohesive group. And a cohesive group is better at achieving goals.

Next, I helped the group build self-confidence, giving the students incrementally more difficult tasks to accomplish. First, they went snorkeling in the Indian Ocean, with the aim of exploring a reef ecosystem and learning the importance of its conservation. Then they participated in a sociocultural exchange: as a group, they had to learn how to fish and prepare food in the traditional way of the local Tsonga culture.

Next—and here's where it got tough—they had to build a Tsonga boat and race it down the river, competing against other teams. It was important that I phrase the goal as a problem to be solved: build a boat. I established clear standards for success: floating. And with the help of the Tsonga people, I identified the resources the group would need to accomplish that goal: the tools and materials necessary to build a boat.

With a clearly defined common goal, the students were forced to communicate more effectively. Members of the group started to feel—if they hadn't already—that they were connected; their communication became interdependent.

When it was all over, students discussed and debated environmental problems and opportunities. I think that because they became better at group communication, they became better individual communicators as well.

the contestants typically return for a reunion episode of the season, where they discuss the game. Some contestants' friendships endure long past the end of the show; others profess their dislike or use the reunion as an opportunity to make amends with tribemates with whom they have conflict.

Group Size and Communication

When you chat with an instructor in her office, you probably speak freely and informally. The two of you may exchange questions and comments rapidly, interrupt one another, and prompt each other for more information. But when you sit in a classroom with that same professor and a roomful of other students, the nature of your communication changes—you would be out of line if you interrupted when she was speaking; you might be expected to raise your hand, defer to other students who are already speaking, or not ask questions at all.

What has changed? Why is the nature of your communication so different in the classroom from the way you converse in her office? When a situation changes from a dyad to a group, communication becomes more complex. In this section, we'll take a look at how group communication grows more complex as the number of individuals increases.

Size and Complexity

The basic logistics of communication—the need to take turns speaking and listening, for example—grow more complex the larger a group gets. You might find it fairly easy to keep up an instant message chat with one friend online, but when a third person joins the conversation, the communication becomes muddied and complicated. This complexity creates the need for increasingly structured exchanges among members. Specifically, the bigger the group, the more its communication takes on the following characteristics:

▸ *Interaction is more formal.* Group communication simply cannot work in the same kind of informal way that dyadic communication occurs, due to the need to include more communicators in the discourse. Individuals

AND YOU?
Think about your experience as part of a group to which you no longer belong—an old job, your high school class, or a club that you're not a part of anymore. Did the group go through all five phases described here?
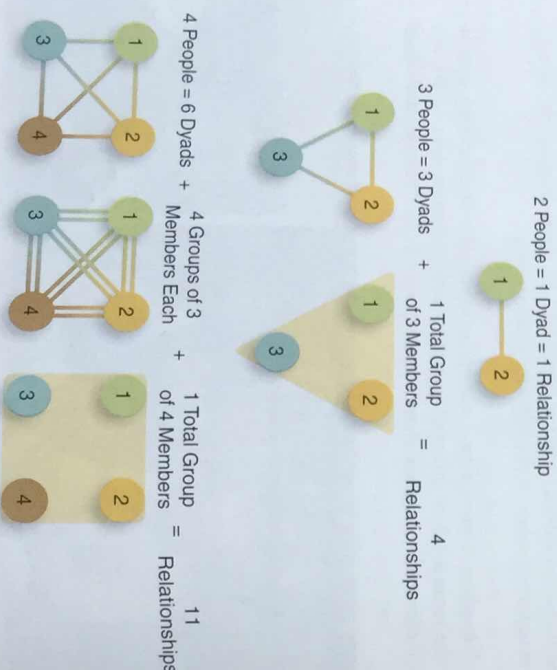
● **WHEN YOU'RE** chatting with a professor during office hours, you are the focus of your professor's attention. However, in the classroom, you have to respect that other students want to speak as well!

participating in a group may feel the need to obtain permission to speak, and they may also be reluctant to interrupt a speaker.

▼ *Each member has limited opportunities to contribute.* Participants may want or be required by a leader to share "floor time" with other group members. Such time constraints can inhibit the quality and quantity of their contributions, difficult time adapting to his friend's new time commitments. Even without a formal leader, in larger groups a few members tend to dominate much of the talk, while the less assertive members tend to remain quiet.

▼ *The communication becomes less intimate.* The greater the number of participants, the less comfortable participants feel self-disclosing or voicing controversial opinions.

▼ *The interaction consumes more time.* As more participants are invited to contribute or debate, the interaction takes longer to complete.

▼ *Relationships become more complex.* As more participants are added, the relationships become more complex. In the dyad, of course, there is only one relationship—that between person 1 and person 2.

As indicated by Figure 9.1, adding just one person to a dyad means that each of the three members of the new group must now deal with four potential relationships—one between persons 1 and 2; another between persons 1 and 3; a third between persons 2 and 3; and finally, the group relationship among all three participants. The number of relationships at play multiplies with each additional participant that joins a group: in a group of four, there are 11 potential relationships; in a group of five, there are 90; a six-member group involves 301 relationships; and so on.

COMPLEXITY OF GROUP RELATIONSHIPS Each time a person is added to a group, the number of potential relationships increases substantially.

2 People = 1 Dyad = 1 Relationship

3 People = 3 Dyads + 1 Total Group of 3 Members = 4 Relationships

4 People = 6 Dyads + 4 Groups of 3 Members Each + 1 Total Group of 4 Members = 11 Relationships

Size and the Formation of Cliques

In the comedy series *The Big Bang Theory,* geniuses Leonard and Sheldon are roommates and close friends. Sheldon, the quirky theoretical physicist, is extremely socially awkward and rarely takes kindly to new people or situations. Inevitably, when Leonard starts dating their neighbor, Penny, Sheldon has a difficult time adapting to his friend's new time commitments. In fact, he even winds up trying to trail along on Leonard and Penny's dates and frequently interrupts them when they wish to enjoy time alone. Even if you've never behaved quite like Sheldon, perhaps you've felt like he does—you love hanging out with your best friend, but whenever her boyfriend is around, you feel like you might as well be invisible. That's because your presence has changed the nature of the communication from dyadic to group communication, but the other two people haven't adjusted their communication behavior. They've remained a dyad, forming a subgroup that leaves you the lone outsider.

As a group's size increases, similar problems arise. **Cliques** (or coalitions) emerge—small subgroups of individuals who have bonded together within a group (Wilmot, 1987). Cliques are a common part of group life—they're a fixture in middle and high schools. You have your marching band kids, your football players, the "in" crowd, the art students, and so on. Many people think that they will escape cliques once high school ends, but this is usually not the case. In college, you might be tempted to form cliques with others in your major, your dorm, or a particular organization. In office settings, members of cliques or coalitions typically sit next to each other in meetings, eat lunch together, share the same opinions about what's going on in their organization, and support one another's positions.

When cliques take shape in a group, communication becomes more challenging because members are no longer dealing only with other individual members. Rather, they must navigate relationships and figure out how to communicate with entire subgroups. In addition, **countercoalitions,** in which one subgroup positions itself against another on an issue, can leave anyone who isn't affiliated with a subgroup in a very awkward position.

● **LEONARD AND PENNY'S** budding relationship turns *The Big Bang Theory* into a big awkward-fest because best friend Sheldon fails to pick up on social cues and give the couple privacy.

As you learn in Chapter 3, we define ourselves by our group memberships, with a tendency toward favoring our ingroup members and comparing ourselves to (and sometimes excluding) outgroup members. While it may be a natural tendency to form cliques with those who share our affiliations, competent communicators must remember to be inclusive of various groups and co-cultures—particularly in team and organizational settings.

Group Size and Social Loafing

On many education and learning blogs, you can find students and instructors complaining about one of the most dreaded assignments of all time: the grueling group project. Consider the following post from an angry group member: "In the 21 courses that composed my MBA program, I had to do a total of seven group projects. I won't bore you with all the gory details, but there were people who didn't do their work, control freaks who wouldn't allow anyone else's input, you name it. Group projects should be abolished." At first glance, doesn't it seem that group projects should be easier than working solo? There are more minds to share in the work and more people to try out ideas with. But what we all dread is having group members who

don't pull their own weight. The fact is, the larger a group, the more prone members may become to **social loafing**—failing to invest the same level of effort in the group that they'd put in if they were working alone or with one other person. Social loafing affects all kinds of group activities, from sports competitions to professional work assignments. Even on cut-throat competitions like *Survivor*, there are always a few contestants who manage to make it through to the final simply by keeping their heads low and letting their teammates do most of the work.

Clearly, social loafing affects both participation and communication in groups (Comer, 1998; Shultz, 1999). When a person fails to speak up because he or she feels shy around a lot of people, the person is engaging in social loafing. Social loafing also results from the feelings of anonymity that occur in large groups. The larger the group, the more difficult it is for an individual member's contributions to the group's efforts to be evaluated and measured. Thus a member may put in less effort, believing that nobody will notice that he or she is slacking off or, conversely, that he or she is working hard. Social loafing even occurs in large electronic networks: some members of an online discussion group, for example, may actively engage in the discourse by posting regular messages, while others—known as lurkers—may just read others' posts and

contribute very little. According to Nagel, Blignaut, and Cronje (2009) these "read-only participants" can distract from the formation of a virtual community and undermine others' perceptions of the credibility and influence of the messages people post (Rains, 2007).

Group Networks

Just as a group's size strongly influences communication within the group, so do networks. **Networks** are patterns of interaction governing who speaks with whom in a group and about what. To understand the nature of networks, you must first consider two main positions within them. The first is *centrality*, or the degree to which an individual sends and receives messages from others in the group. The most central person in the group receives and sends the highest number of messages in a given time period. At the other end of the spectrum is *isolation*—a position from which a group member sends and receives fewer messages than other members.

A team leader or manager typically has the highest level of centrality in a formal group, but centrality is not necessarily related to status or power. The CEO of a company, for example, may be the end recipient of all information generated by teams below her, but in fact only a limited number of individuals within the organization are able to communicate directly with her. Her assistant, in fact, may have a higher degree of centrality in the network. As you might imagine, networks play a powerful role in any group's communication, whether the group is a family, a sports team, a civic organization, or a large corporation.

In some groups, all members speak with all others regularly about a wide range of topics. In others, perhaps only a few members are "allowed" to speak directly with the group's leader or longest-standing member about serious issues. In still other groups, some members may work alongside one another without communicating at all. There are several types of networks, including chain networks, all-channel networks, and wheel networks (see Figure 9.2) (Bavelous, 1950).

EVALUATING COMMUNICATION ETHICS

Sketchy Behavior

You have recently formed a comedy troupe with four other friends: Calvin, Eddie, Meredith, and Sylvia. Your first live show with the group is in just a few weeks, and your group has written and rehearsed five sketches. But you and Calvin have had doubts about one sketch, written by Eddie and Sylvia, since day one. Rather than voice your concerns, you and Calvin have been trying to come up with an idea for a sketch that in your opinion outclasses the one you've been having problems with.

It is now a few days before the show, and the two of you have decided, independent of the other members, that the weaker sketch needs to be changed in favor of the one you've written. You are concerned about how this will look and have a nagging feeling the other members are going to perceive your writing of this sketch as a selfish way to push your work over that of your teammates, but you feel strongly that the new sketch will make the show a greater success. Calvin suggests that you present your sketch to Meredith, since she was not involved in writing either sketch. "If we convince Meredith that our sketch is the stronger one," Calvin reasons, "we'll be able to point to her opinion as a truly objective opinion—she's got no agenda."

You're pretty certain that Meredith will prefer your sketch, not only because you feel it is better but also because it features a role that Meredith would love to play. And you know that if you talk to Meredith beforehand, you'll have a clear majority in favor of your sketch should the decision be put to a vote. But is this ethical?

> **THINK ABOUT THIS**

❶ What role did group communication play in this scenario? Might cliques have been involved? What were other communication options?

❷ Is it unethical to attempt to gain Meredith's vote even if you honestly believe that it's in the best interest of the group?

❸ What ethical implications arise from approaching Meredith with the new sketch? Should the sketch be presented to the entire team at the same time? Is it fair to tempt Meredith with a juicy role in exchange for her vote?

Chain Networks

In a **chain network**, information is passed from one member to the next rather than shared among members. Such networks can be practical for sharing written information: an e-mail, forwarded from person to person along a chain, for example, allows each person to read the original information from other prior
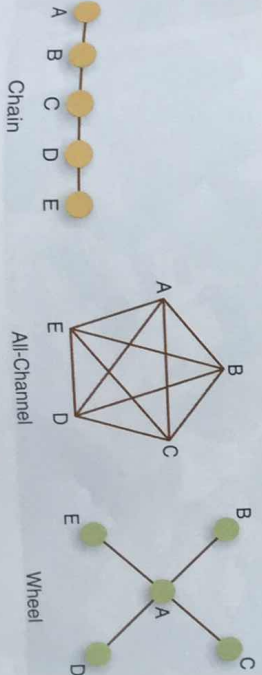
Chain   All-Channel   Wheel

recipients. But this form of group communication can lead to frustration and miscommunication when information is conveyed through other codes, such as spoken words. It can be like a game of telephone, where the message gets distorted as it progresses down the chain. Person A tells person B that their boss, Luis, had a fender bender on the way to work and will miss the 10:00 A.M. meeting. Person B tells person C that Luis was in an accident and will not be in the office today. Person C tells person D that Luis was injured in an accident; no one knows when he'll be in. You can imagine that Luis will be in a full-body cast by the time the message reaches person G!

All-Channel Networks

In an **all-channel network**, all members are an equal distance from one another, and all members interact with each other. When people talk about roundtable discussions, they're talking about all-channel groups: there is no leader, and all members operate at equal levels of centrality. Such networks can be useful for collaborative projects and for brainstorming ideas, but the lack of order can make it difficult for such groups to complete tasks. Imagine, for example, that you're trying to arrange a meetup with a group of friends. You send out a mass e-mail to all of them, to determine days that will work, and you ask for suggestions about where to meet. Each recipient can simply hit "reply all" and share their response with the group. By using an all-channel network, the entire group learns that Friday is not good for anyone, but Saturday is and while a few people have suggested favorite spots, there's no consensus on where to go. That's where wheel networks come in.

Wheel Networks

Wheel networks are a sensible alternative for situations in which individual members' activities and contributions must be culled and tracked in order to avoid duplicating efforts and to ensure that all tasks are being completed. In

● **THE COPYEDITING TEAM** in a newsroom works as a wheel network. All of the copyeditors report to one copy chief, who regulates the copyediting style.

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a **wheel network**, one individual acts as a touchstone for all the others in the group; all group members share their information with that one individual, who then shares the information with the rest of the group. Consider the example above: as the sender of the initial e-mail, you might take on a leadership role and ask everyone just to reply to you. Then you could follow up with a decision about time and place to meet and send that out to everyone else. Wheel networks are common in sororities and fraternities, with the chapter president at the center. All other officers must report to the president, and the president must report back to the officers on the status of the others. Such groups have the lowest shared centrality but are very efficient (Leavitt, 1951).

Understanding Group Roles

If you've watched the cast of *House* over the past few seasons, you know that the diagnostic physicians at Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital tend to take on certain roles on their team. Dr. Eric Foreman is relatively reserved; he listens carefully but also tends to ask blunt questions to gather important information on patients. Medical student Martha Masters typically encouraged group harmony and ethical communication with patients. And then there's Dr. Gregory House, the team leader, who is well known for pushing his own agenda and openly mocking his underlings. The fact is that we all tend to fall into particular roles in the various groups we belong to, and these roles influence group communication. There are three types of roles—task, social, and antigroup. Let's look at each of them in turn.

Task Roles

In some cases, a role is defined by a task that needs doing, and a person is asked or appointed to fill it (or he or she volunteers). Such **task roles** are concerned with the accomplishment of the group's goals—specifically, the activities that need to be carried out for the group to achieve its objectives. For example, your role on a committee charged with organizing a sorority rush party might be to post advertisements for the event in key locations around campus and in the campus newspaper.

Task roles can also be specifically related to the group's communication; for instance:

▶ An *information giver* offers facts, beliefs, personal experience, or other input during group discussions ("When the sisters of Chi Omega posted their ad in the student lounge, they had good attendance at their rush party").

▶ An *information seeker* asks for additional input or clarification of ideas or opinions that members have presented ("Jane, are you saying you're not comfortable with the party theme we're proposing?").

▶ An *elaborator* provides further clarification of points, often adding to what others have said ("I agree with Ellie about selecting Currier & Chives as our caterer; my friend works there, and she's a great cook").

● ALTHOUGH MIKE "The Situation" Sorrentino has been known to anger his *Jersey Shore* housemates with clueless disrespect, he also fancies himself the "house parent" and makes an effort to extinguish disputes among the friends.

▼ An *initiator* helps the group move toward its objective by proposing solutions, presenting new ideas, or suggesting new ways of looking at an issue the group is discussing ("How essential is it that we schedule the rush party for the last Friday of the month? If we moved it a week later, we'd have more time to find the right band").

▼ An *administrator* keeps the conversation on track ("OK, let's get back to the subject of when to schedule the party") and ensures that meetings begin and end on time ("We've got five minutes left; should we wind up?").

▼ In an online forum, the person who coordinates and sometimes screens the members' comments is called the *moderator* or *master*. An *elder* is the name given to an online group member who has participated a long time and whose authority is respected by the less experienced *newbies*.

Social Roles

Some group roles evolve to reflect individual members' personality traits and interests; such roles are called **social roles**. For example, a nurturing housemate might unofficially fill the role of "house parent"—baking cookies for everyone, listening compassionately to people's problems, and making everyone feel taken care of. Consider these additional examples of social roles (Anderson, Riddle, & Martin, 1999; Benne & Sheats, 1948; Salazar, 1996):

▼ A *harmonizer* seeks to smooth over tension in the group by settling differences among members ("OK, you both want the party to succeed; you just have different ideas about how to get there").

▼ A *gatekeeper* works to ensure that each member of the group contributes to discussions ("Tonya, we haven't heard from you yet on this question of when to schedule the party. What are your thoughts?").

▼ A *sensor* expresses group feelings, moods, or relationships in an effort to recognize the climate and capitalize on it or modify it for the better ("I'm registering a lot of frustration in the committee right now. Let's take a break and reconnect in half an hour").

Each member in a group can play task and social roles. For example, though Evelyn was appointed chairperson of the rush party committee, she also serves as the group's unofficial harmonizer because she has a knack for mitigating tensions between people. Members can also adopt a personal or task role if they believe the role is needed but no one else seems to be willing to fill it. To illustrate, by the end of the rush party committee's first meeting, Candace noticed an air of excitement infusing the gathering as ideas for the party theme began flying back and forth. Wanting to build on that excitement and channel it into commitment to the group's cause, she took on the role of sensor. As the meeting came to a close, each member took a moment to explain what tasks she would be responsible for that week. When Candace's turn came, she told the other members, "I'm really excited about all the progress we made today. I think that with this kind of enthusiasm, we're going to throw the best rush party in our history!" The meeting ended on a high note, and members adjourned eager to dig into their tasks.

Antigroup Roles

Unlike task and social roles, **antigroup roles** create problems because they serve individual members' priorities at the expense of group needs. You've probably seen evidence of these antigroup roles in the groups you belong to:

▼ A *blocker* indulges in destructive communication, including opposing all ideas and stubbornly reintroducing an idea after the group has already rejected or bypassed it ("None of the dates any of you proposed will work for the party. It really needs to be five weeks from today, as I said earlier").

▼ An *avoider* refuses to engage in the group's proceedings by expressing cynicism or nonchalance toward ideas presented or by joking or changing the subject ("Well, whatever, I'm guessing it's not a big deal if this party doesn't even happen, right?").

▼ A *recognition seeker* calls attention to himself or herself by boasting or by going on and on about his or her qualifications or personal achievements ("I planned a gathering for a women's studies group last year, and it went really well. People still talk about it! So trust me on this one").

▼ A *distractor* goes off on tangents or tells irrelevant stories ("Does anyone know what happened on *Grey's Anatomy* last night? I missed it").

CONNECT

Competent leadership can address problematic antigroup roles. As you learn in Chapter 10, a *directive leader* might lay out tasks to thwart a distracter; a *supportive leader* might thank each member for his or her contributions, preventing a recognition seeker from claiming the glory. Leaders have the power to affect norms and roles, encouraging group members to make productive contributions.

▼ A *troll* is someone in an online group who intentionally inserts irrelevant and inflammatory comments into the discussion in order to stir up controversy.

To mitigate the impact of these antigroup roles, members can revisit the norms the group has established and make the changes needed to improve group communication (for example, "All ideas get a fair hearing"). People fulfilling certain task or social roles can also help. For instance, if you're a gatekeeper, you can prompt an avoider to contribute her opinion on a proposal that the group has been considering. Research also indicates that positive and proactive responses to avoiders and blockers can help establish individuals as leaders in their organizations (Garner & Poole, 2009). For example, in online groups, masters frequently encourage group members to not "feed the troll"—do not respond or take the bait of abusive comments.

Role Conflict

Imagine that you work at a local retail store and you've been promoted to store manager. As part of your new role, you will have to manage staff members who are working as individual contributors at the store. Several of them are also your close friends, and you all used to be at the same level in the store.

Role conflict arises in a group whenever expectations for a member's behavior are incompatible. The roles of manager and friend are inherently in conflict. After all, as a manager, you'll have to evaluate staff members' performance. And how can you give a good friend a poor performance review and still remain friends?

As you might imagine, role conflict can make group communication profoundly challenging, and there are no easy answers to this kind of dilemma. In the case of the retail store, you might decide not to give your friend a negative review in the interest of saving the friendship. Or perhaps you'll decide to give candid constructive feedback to your friend on his performance. But you'll try to constrain the damage to your friendship by saying something like "I hope you know I'm offering this feedback as a way to help you improve. As your friend and manager, I want to see you do well here."

Additional Factors Affecting Group Communication

In addition to size and networks, numerous other factors affect communication within groups—most notably cohesion, groupthink, norms, clarity of goals, and individual differences. In the sections that follow, we explore each of these additional factors in more detail.

Cohesion

Cohesion is the degree to which group members have bonded, like each other, and consider themselves to be one entity. A cohesive group identifies itself as a single unit rather than a collection of individuals, which helps hold the group

together in the face of adversity. In fact, cohesion is an important factor in generating a positive group temperament, or *climate*, in which members take pride in the group, treat each other with respect, feel confident about their abilities, and achieve higher success in accomplishing goals. Such positive climates can also foster optimism and confidence in the face of obstacles. A self-confident, cohesive group tends to minimize problems, eliminate barriers, and cope well with crises (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2001).

Much research has focused on how cohesion affects a group's effectiveness and communication. In general, cohesive groups perform better than noncohesive groups on decision-making tasks (for example, selecting a course of action more quickly and making more informed choices) (Carless & DePaola, 2000). Nonverbal communication is also influenced by group cohesion. Yasui (2009) found that cohesive group members often repeat and build on one another's gestures. This collaborative process indicates a shared imagination and agreement about the ideas they are proposing.

You can determine group cohesion in two ways. First, take a look at how the participants feel about their own membership in the group. Members of a cohesive group are enthusiastic, identify with the purposes of the group, and tell outsiders about its activities. Even positive, constructive argumentation (as opposed to verbal aggressiveness) can be a sign of group cohesiveness (Anderson & Martin, 1999). Second, consider how well the group retains members. A cohesive group will retain more members than a noncohesive group. That's why employers are often concerned with employee turnover—the number of people leaving and joining the staff. Not only do the arrival and departure of staff cost time and money for retraining and such, but they also affect—and reflect—group cohesion. The more that members receive satisfaction and fulfill their needs through their group participation, the more cohesive the group.

Gouran (2003) offers several practical suggestions for increasing cohesion and fostering a more positive group experience:

▼ Avoid dominating other group members.

▼ Stay focused on the tasks the group must accomplish.

▼ Be friendly.

▼ Show sensitivity to and respect for other members.

▼ Demonstrate that you value others' opinions.

▼ Cooperate with other members rather than compete with them.

Clearly, cohesive groups offer tremendous benefits, but too much cohesion can actually cause the group to be unproductive. For example, if you and the other members of your study group enjoy each other's company to the point

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● A DISRESPECTFUL or unreasonable boss risks weakening the cohesion of his or her team of employees, fostering a negative group climate, and ultimately reducing the team's effectiveness.

COMMUNICATIONACROSSCULTURES

The International, American Pastime

The typical major league baseball team has a full roster of players and a substantial staff of coaches who work with players on specific skills. There's the general manager, a bullpen coach, a batting coach, a bench coach, and strength and conditioning coaches. There's a bevy of trainers and coordinators. And sometimes, there's a language coach.

America's pastime is, like America itself, a melting pot of diversity. Homegrown players work alongside newly arrived teammates from as nearby as the Dominican Republic and as far away as Japan. Many of these players arrive with much fanfare but with few or no English skills. In order to succeed as part of a team, however, it's crucial that they be able to communicate with their teammates and coaches, both on and off the field. And while the finite rules of baseball (along with the formal nonverbal signals teams develop to communicate on the field) help to create a clear code of communication that all the players share, language barriers can still hamper communication among group members.

Spanish-speaking players may find that they have a slightly easier transition than others because they are likely to find at least a few players or staff members who speak their native tongue. Yet having players split off into Spanish- versus English-speaking subgroups can be a true challenge to team cohesion. As such, the San Diego Padres, like many other major league teams, offer English language classes to help players who are not fluent in English. But the team also takes the opposite approach: they teach basic Spanish to their staff. "It's something I thought was important to make us efficient when dealing with players when we're going to the Dominican [Republic] or with our players who are just coming here and don't have command of the English language yet," said Padres Director of Player Development Randy Smith (Brock, 2010). In a sport that is increasingly recruiting from Spanish-speaking countries, teams are growing bilingual, so Smith's idea is a logical step.

While creating a bilingual organization makes sense, there are some non-native players who speak neither English nor Spanish. In some cases, the best solution is to hire a translator. For example, Japanese star Hideki Matsui is rarely seen unaccompanied by his translator, Roger Kahlon. Translators must suit up to accompany players on the field during practices; they have their own lockers in the team clubhouse (Geffner, 2005). When Matsui led the Yankees to the 2009 championship, Kahlon accompanied him on a float down New York's Canyon of Heroes and was even awarded a key to the city along with the rest of the team (Nelson, 2009). For the Yankees, the language barrier could have been a hindrance to group cohesion. But having a translator on hand made communication easier, making Kahlon a welcome part of the group.

THINK ABOUT THIS

❶ How important is it to have all the players on a team speak the same language? Would having a single language policy increase group cohesion? What might the downsides of such a policy be?

❷ Who is responsible for developing a shared code when coaches and players speak different languages? How might the rules of communication be worked out between individuals who speak different languages?

❸ What other cultural differences might inhibit communication on a professional sports team? How does multiculturalism and globalization affect other sports?

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that you never get your work done, then you'll be unlikely to achieve your goal: doing well on an exam! In addition, excessive cohesion can lead to groupthink, an important group factor that we discuss next.

Groupthink

As you learned in Chapter 8, engaging in productive conflict fosters healthy debate and leads to better decision making. Unity and cohesion are important for groups to operate effectively, but if these qualities are taken to an extreme—that is, if they become more powerful than members' desire to evaluate alternative courses of action—the group can't generate enough diverse ideas to make smart decisions (Miller & Morrison, 2009; Park, 2000).

Consider the tragic explosion of the U.S. space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. Prior to launch, there had been some concern among many engineers that certain fittings (called O-rings) might fail, but the shuttle launched in spite of these concerns. Eventually, those fittings were indeed found to be related to the explosion, but a large part of the blame for the disaster was laid on communication failures within NASA. Engineers later testified that the climate at NASA made them reluctant to voice their concerns if they couldn't back them up with a full set of data (McConnell, 1987). Indeed, the Rogers Commission (1986), which investigated the disaster, noted that had safety concerns been more clearly articulated—and had NASA management been more receptive to concerns raised by engineers from various departments—it is unlikely that *Challenger* would have launched that day.

The *Challenger* explosion is often pointed to as a classic example of **groupthink**—a situation in which group members strive to maintain cohesiveness and minimize conflict by refusing to critically examine ideas, analyze proposals, or test solutions (Janis, 1982). In a more receptive group climate, a productive

● **SOMETIMES VOICING** dissent is more important than group unity. If the engineers at NASA had shared their concerns, the *Challenger* disaster might not have happened.

conflict over the O-rings might have revealed the problems that the engineers sensed but couldn't quite put their fingers on. The following are some symptoms of groupthink that you should be aware of in all of your group memberships:

▾ Participants reach outward consensus and avoid expressing disagreement so as not to hurt each other's feelings or appear disloyal.

▾ Members who do express disagreement with the majority are pressured to conform to the majority view.

▾ Tough questions are ignored or discouraged.

▾ Members spend more effort justifying their decisions than testing them.

One important way to prevent groupthink is to encourage dissent among members and manage it productively (Klocke, 2007). In fact, some of the same practices for handling interpersonal conflict discussed in Chapter 8 can help you deal constructively with disagreements in a group. For example, frame conflicts as disagreements over issues or ideas, not as evidence of a weak character or some other personal shortcoming in particular members. To illustrate, when someone in the group expresses a dissenting viewpoint, don't say, "It's clear that you aren't as dedicated to our cause as I had hoped." Instead, say something like "It looks like we have some different ideas circulating about how to handle this new problem. Let's list these ideas and talk about the possible benefits and risks of each of them." A recent study by Aakhus and Rumsey (2010) supports this point by noting that productive conflict can generate *more* supportive community for members of an online cancer support community than simply expecting members to keep dissenting opinions private.

Norms

As you saw earlier in the chapter, over time a group will develop norms. Norms are determined by the group itself and are imposed by members on themselves and each other; they direct the behavior of the group as a whole and affect the conduct of individual members. In a business environment, norms might dictate the kinds of topics that can be expressed in a meeting (Should non-task-related conversation be interjected? Are jokes appropriate?). In an online group, norms might evolve to govern the use of foul language, negative comments, or criticism. For example, a recent study showed that established members of an online anorexia support group allow new members to share pro-anorexic statements in order to establish that they are ill. In time, however, these members are initiated into the group norm that prohibits such unhealthy and negative statements (Strommel & Koole, 2010).

Some norms have a negative impact on communication. For example, suppose a group permits one member to dominate the conversation or allows members to dismiss an idea before discussing its pros and cons. A group with these norms will have difficulty generating enough diverse ideas to make informed decisions. If you find yourself in a group with unproductive norms like these,

consider modifying them—this is possible if you approach the task diplomatically (Brilhart & Galanes, 1992). The following three-step process can help:

1. *Express your loyalty and dedication to the group, to show that you have the group's best interests at heart.* For instance, "I've been a member of this school committee for two years now and have hung in there during the tough times as well as the good times. I want to see us be the best we can be."

2. *Cite specific examples of the behavior you find harmful to the group's effectiveness.* To illustrate, "When we didn't take time to explore the pros and cons of the special-ed funding strategy that came up last month, we ended up making a decision that we regretted later."

3. *Ask other members for their opinions about the problem norm you've identified.* If others feel that the norm is still warranted, they may advocate keeping in ("Well, there are some situations where we don't have as much time as we'd like to consider the merits of an idea. During those moments, we need to be able to move ahead with a decision quickly").

With respect, productive discussion, the group may decide to maintain the norm, change it under specific conditions ("We'll have someone play devil's advocate when time allows"), or abandon it entirely.

Clarity of Goals

Think of the worst group meeting you've ever attended. How would you describe that meeting? Was the conversation disorganized? Confusing? Did all the talking seem like just a lot of hot air and a huge waste of time? Did you leave the meeting with a bad feeling about working with the group again in the future? When people have these kinds of reactions to a group's communication, the culprit is very likely the lack of a clear goal. To communicate productively in any group, members need goal clarity; that is, they must understand what the group's purpose is, what goals will help the group achieve its purpose, how close the group is to achieving its goals, and whether the activities members are engaging in are helping the group move toward its goals.

Goals vary considerably from one group to another. For example, a team in one of your classes may have the simple goal of completing a fifteen-minute in-class exercise and reporting the results to the rest of the class. An urban beautification fundraising committee may have the goal of collecting $4,000 for new landscaping at a neighborhood park.

How can you make sure your group has clear goals? You might suggest the goals yourself. However, you'll get even better results by encouraging the rest of the members to define the group's goals. When members take part in establishing goals, they feel more committed to and excited about achieving those objectives. Research shows that a group is more likely to reach its goals when those goals are communicated in terms that are specific ("Raise $4,000 by the end of March"), inspiring ("Imagine our neighborhood becoming a community of choice for young families"), and prioritized ("We'll need to focus on this goal first and then this other one next") (O'Hair, Friedrich, & Dixon, 2002).

CONNECT

As you learn in Chapter 1, goal achievement is an important function of communication in all contexts. Just remember that while it's important for a group to keep the end goal in sight, competent communicators are flexible—they try to maintain interdependence while being open to various ideas on achieving goals. They also recognize that the goal itself may change as group members share ideas and present solutions to problems.

Groups are also more likely to reach their goals if members have some autonomy in deciding how to achieve them. For example, everyone on the urban beautification committee has agreed that the group wants to raise $4,000 by the end of March. But the committee chair decides how the group should approach this task. Instead, he invites members to brainstorm ideas for reaching the goal. By encouraging people to come up with ways to achieve the goal, a group leader ensures that members produce a wide range of ideas. And the more ideas the group explores, the more likely its members will ultimately make an informed choice about how to move forward.

Here are some additional communication strategies for setting group goals effectively (O'Hair, Friedrich, & Dixon, 2002):

▶ *Define goals in terms of problems to be solved* (for example, "Our goal is to raise $4,000 to beautify Dixon Park"), not values to be embodied ("Our goal is to be good citizens of this community"). Value-based goals are vague, so it's difficult to know if and when you've achieved them. (What does "being a good citizen" mean in practice, anyway?)

▶ *Establish clear performance standards.* How will your group know when it has succeeded in reaching its goal? For example, "We will have $4,000 in our checking account by the last day of March."

▶ *Identify the resources your group will need to accomplish its goals.* Include such things as members' time, office space, funds, and equipment. By anticipating resources, you avoid getting into a situation where your worthy goal shrivels and dies because it never received sufficient funding or attention.

▶ *Recognize contingencies that may arise.* For instance, "Our goal is to have $4,000 in our account by the end of March, on the assumption that we have good weather for the fundraising campaign we're planning to hold on the town common."

▶ *Determine how you will monitor and report progress toward your group's goals.* Will the group hold a weekly status meeting? Will members circulate daily e-mails to update one another?

Once your group begins working toward its goals, encourage yourself and your fellow members to talk regularly about the decisions you're making and the actions you're taking to ensure that these all support progress toward the goals.

Individual Differences

Members of a particular group may share goals and an identity, but they each bring personal differences to the group as well. And these differences can strongly affect communication. Let's examine how cultural factors and communication apprehension—which vary by individual—affect our ability to communicate in groups.

Cultural Factors

As you've learned throughout this book, culture has a big impact on how we communicate. When a group has culturally diverse members, that diversity can have benefits (such as enabling the group to produce a wide array of viewpoints) as well as challenges (including misunderstandings between members).

As we noted earlier, cultures in nations such as the United States, Great Britain, and Canada are largely individualist. Their members value individual accomplishment and competition and strive to differentiate themselves from one another. In an individualist culture, people place a high value on getting their own opinions heard and appreciated, and so they may strive to have their ideas "win" within the group. In a collectivist culture, people value cooperation and group harmony. They allow group norms (rather than their own personal goals) to have the largest influence on their behaviors and thoughts (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). Not surprisingly, this difference can present a challenge when members of these cultures are working together in groups. People from individualist cultures will likely more openly vocalize their disagreement with the others and try to persuade each other, while the collectivists may feel "bulldozed" as they stifle their own objections in order to help the others save face.

Gender and sex differences can also affect group communication largely due to the social expectations of masculine and feminine individuals. For example, research shows that women are socially encouraged to focus on establishing relationships within a group, while men—who are socialized to focus on autonomy and success—tend to pay more attention to completing the task at hand (Baird, 1986). Moreover, masculine individuals seek to display signs of their power while communicating in groups (for example, pointing out their credentials or their achievements), whereas those with a more feminine style are likely to show signs of affection toward each other (Helgesen, 1990). These differences were cleverly mocked on *The Simpsons*, when Springfield elementary is suddenly divided into two separate schools. Lisa enjoys the camaraderie at her new, all girls' school, but is disappointed to find her math class focused not on arithmetic or geometry, but on self-esteem, group sing-alongs, and "feeling math." She winds up dressing up as a boy in order to attend the all boys' school, where she can learn without anyone worrying about hurting people's feelings. Lisa rejected her gender socialization in order to find a more appropriate group setting in which to further her study of her favorite subject (Brooks & Groening, 2006).
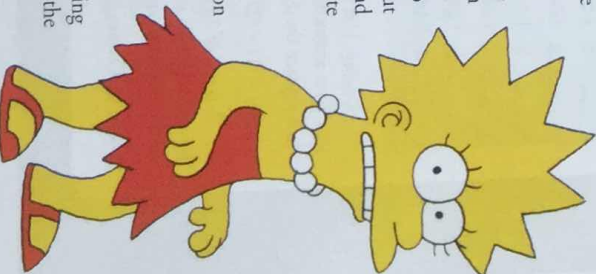
Communication Apprehension

The next time you're sitting in your communication classroom or logging on to a discussion forum in your online course, take a peek around. Is there someone who never speaks up or raises a hand? Is there someone who rarely posts thoughts on a discussion board? Perhaps you're assuming that this person has nothing to say or that he or she is a social loafer. Maybe you're right. But it's also possible that this individual feels uncomfortable participating in group conversation even when his or her contribution would clearly help the

AND YOU?
Have you ever misunderstood another member of a group you were involved in because of cultural differences? If so, how did you and the other person deal with the misunderstanding?

● **POOR LISA.** She enjoys the camaraderie of other girls at school, but she wants to learn how to do math, not feel it!

group. What explains this communication apprehension? Scholars have identified several causes (Schullery & Gibson, 2001):

▼ *Lack of self-esteem.* When an individual doubts the worth of his contributions, he may decline to speak up in a group. Fear of being wrong, of being mocked, or of creating a bad impression can further lead to communication apprehension.

▼ *Status differences.* Group members who hold a relatively low position in the group's social or political hierarchy may avoid disagreeing with their superiors in the group because they fear retribution from the more powerful persons.

▼ *Unbalanced participation.* When a group member—or a small number of group members—dominates the conversation in a group, the less aggressive members may retreat from communicating. This strongly influences how

decisions get made in the group. One classic study found that groups tend to adopt ideas that receive the largest number of favorable comments (Hoffman & Maier, 1964). If most of those comments come from a single member and that person has inaccurate or incomplete information to back up his or her argument, the group risks making a faulty decision.

Some simple techniques can help a group address communication apprehension among members. For example, to ease self-esteem problems, consider starting a group meeting by having each member tell the member to their left what he or she appreciates about that person. To rebalance participation, suggest a norm that calls for everyone to weigh in on ideas presented in the group. Or look for members who are holding back and invite them specifically to contribute their views.

● **AS THE EQUITABLE** group leader of Andy's toys in the *Toy Story* films, Woody takes particular care to hear the input of quieter and more apprehensive members of the group, such as Rex and Slinky Dog.

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what about you?

• How Well Do You Interact in a Group Setting?

To test how apprehensive you might be in a group setting, complete the following six items, which are based on the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24). Use the following scale: 1 = strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = undecided; 4 = disagree; and 5 = strongly disagree.

_____ 1. I do not like to participate in group discussions.

_____ 2. Generally, I feel comfortable participating in group discussions.

_____ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.

_____ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.

_____ 5. I get tense and nervous when I engage in a group discussion with new people.

_____ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.

Scoring: Use the following formula, in which the numbers in parentheses represent your answers to the six items. (For example, if you answered "4" for item 1, then replace the "1" in the formula with a 4.)

18 − (1) + (2) − (3) + (4) − (5) + (6)

A score of 24 or above indicates a high level of communication apprehension for participation in group discussions; a score of 12 or below indicates a low level of communication apprehension for this situation.

Source: McCroskey (1982). Adapted with permission.

BACK TO ➤

The "3-Day" Walks

At the beginning of this chapter, we talked about the annual Susan G. Komen for the Cure's 3-Day, sixty-mile walks to raise funds for breast cancer—and the initiation of individual participants into a community that shares their goals, drive, and (quite often) life experiences. Consider the nature of the 3-Day walks in light of what you've learned in this chapter.

▼ It may seem unbelievable that thousands of men and women—most of whom will not speak to each other in the process of the walk—could be considered a group. And yet they develop a shared identity (fighters, survivors, supporters), share common goals (to raise money in an effort to rid the world of the scourge of breast cancer), and develop interdependent relationships (supporting each other's fundraising and training efforts).

▼ Participants in the 3-Day walks fall into several group types. They are certainly examples of a support group: participants share and work through similar struggles and life experiences. In addition, 3-Day walk groups can also be considered problem-solving groups (because they attempt to raise money for a cure) and even primary groups (many walkers go on to develop committed friendships with each other).

▼ As noted, Susan G. Komen for the Cure requires that each participant raise at least $2,300 and commit to training for the walk. While there are opportunities for group training and fundraising, each individual member of the group is still held personally accountable for his or her efforts. This makes social loafing—common in large groups—much more difficult.