

Inhaling: Perception

John Stewart, Karen E. Zediker, and Saskia Witteborn

These next pages describe the basic processes humans use to perceive anything, as well as some of the special processes we use to perceive people. It also alerts you to five practical perception problems that can distort your communicating. The reading comes from an interpersonal communication text I wrote with two colleagues.

Our first point is that people make sense out of what we encounter by engaging three fundamental perception processes: selecting, organizing, and inferring. We do not just "soak up sense data"; rather, we actively interpret everything that we encounter, and we do this with these three moves. First, we select uses to attend to or prioritize, based not only on what's available but also on past judgments, expectations, and a variety of cultural cues. Second, we organize the cues we've selected into a whole that makes sense. And finally, we go beyond the cues to infer what they mean.

Perceptual differences can occur anywhere along this line, and so can perceptual problems. Some evidence indicates that men and women select, organize, and infer differently, as do people with different native languages.

The mental patterns that help us organize what we perceive are called *cognitive schemata*. Two kinds of schemata that especially affect communication are person prototypes and scripts. The former is a generalized representation of a "type" of person—a professor, parent, physician, or priest, for example. Stereotypes are rigid person prototypes. Scripts are generalized sequences of action—how you behave in a restaurant, for example, or how you ask someone out.

The reading also explains three processes that influence our inference making, impression formation, attribution, and stereotyping. We form impressions, in part, using implicit personality theories that shape the ways we perceive people. Attributions are explanations of other people's behavior that are based on either internal or external factors. And stereotyping is a natural process; that, while unavoidable, needs to be closely monitored.

The final section briefly discusses five perception processes that can affect where your communication is on the impersonal–interpersonal scale: fast thinking, overload avoidance, the entertainment factor, snap judgments, and attributional errors. When you've finished this reading, you should have a good general understanding of how your perception processes can affect your interpersonal communicating.

MAIN IDEAS

- Perception—of things and of people—is an active, not a passive process.
- The first active part is selection; persons attend to some available cues and not to others.
- Selection is affected by properties of the cues, for example, loudness, and by emotions and evaluations of the perceiver.

"Inhaling: Perception" from *Together: Communicating Interpersonally: A Social Construction Approach*, 6th

- A second active part is organizing; people arrange cues into meaningful patterns.
- Inferring is the third active part of perception; people go beyond sensory cues to assign significance and meaning to what they perceive.
- Inferences are affected by cultural assumptions, including gender patterns.
- Cognitive schemata are mental guidelines that help us process incoming cues.
- Person prototypes are schemata that provide general representations for types of persons.
- Scripts are schemata that identify sequences of actions.
- Inferences are affected by the process of impression formation—integrating observations into an overall "picture" of a person.
- Inferences are also affected by attributions, which assign a cause to a behavior. Attributions can contribute to fault/blame problems.
- Stereotyping also affects how people make inferences.
- Five perception difficulties can especially affect your interpersonal communication: fast thinking, avoiding overload, the entertainment factor, snap judgments, and attributional errors.

PREVIEW

Remember that we're using the metaphor of inhaling and exhaling to explain the receptive and expressive parts of communication... The first point to remember is that there's much more to inhaling than the passive reception of incoming messages. Inhaling combines the two active, interpretive processes of perceiving and listening....

People make sense out of the world through their perceptual experience, and experience is affected by culture, membership in various social groups, and in fact, by every relationship a person has. Your perceptions influence and contribute to the inhaling process in profound ways. You select sensory cues, organize them mentally, and make inferences about them. One of the reasons why people select, organize, and make inferences is that each of us lives in a complex world that we have to make sense of. Three kinds of inference-making processes that people use to make sense of the world and the people in it are stereotyping, attribution, and impression formation.

PERCEPTION: AN INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

Perception can be defined as a social and cognitive process in which people assign meaning to sensory cues! People often assume that the "truth" of things exists out there somewhere in what they are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. For example, you know the old saying "Seeing is believing." It is tempting to think that your eyes give you a perfect picture of what is happening in your own portion of "reality." But perception takes a picture through a lens,

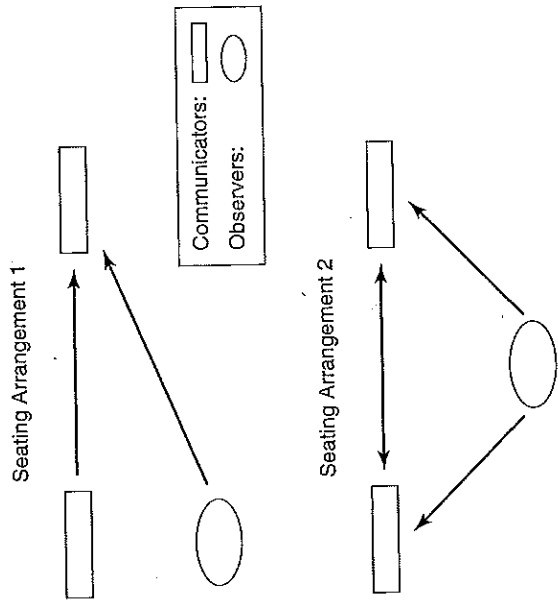


FIGURE 5-1 Diagram of Conversational Partners

of the pressure of the chair against your body or noises from the next room until reading this sentence shifts your attention to these cues.

When communicating with others, people also perceive selectively. Some research indicates that people tend to focus on whatever or whomever is easiest to attend to—the closest person, the person with the loudest voice, the person we can see most easily. For example, in a series of studies, two researchers asked subjects to observe conversations between two people and varied the seating positions of the observers (see Figure 5-1). Some observers looked directly at one of the two conversation partners but could see only the back and side of the other. When these observers were asked to rate the conversational partners on a number of scales, they found they rated the person they faced as more responsible for the topic and tone of the conversation. The observers who could see both participants equally well rated them during the same period of time as equally responsible for the tone and topics of conversation. The researchers concluded that where your attention is directed influences what you perceive. Your selective perceptions affect your judgments about the people involved (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

But the process of selection is not this simple. What you attend to is not just a response to a property of some cue—the loudest, brightest, or most visually direct. You also select cues about people based on your past judgments of them. So, if you are angry with your partner, you are far more likely to perceive all sorts of little irritating habits, just as you overlook or don't see negative characteristics in someone you love. The bottom line is that you cannot perceive all the sensory cues that are available to you. Perception is selective, and what we

Perception is shaped by the perceiving person's experience and understanding of his or her place in the world. If perception were simply a matter of accurately processing sensory cues, you would expect everybody to perceive in a fairly similar way. However, this is not how perception works; as we said, it's an active process. When we make this point, we also mean that perception is, to a considerable extent, self-initiated and voluntary, a function of each person's response choices. You are not forced to interpret cues in a certain way; you have considerable control over your perceptual processes, especially as you become come aware of them.

Perception occurs through three basic subprocesses: selection, organization, and inference making. But before these three can begin, a person has to receive information through the senses—touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. This information is received in the form of sensory data, or cues. A cue is the smallest perceivable "bit" of information. As soon as your outermost sensory neurons receive a cue, you begin selecting, organizing, and inferring from this information. It isn't possible to perceive anything without selecting, organizing, and inferring. So, from the start, perception is an *interpretive process*. The following brief exercise will show you that interpretation is a large part of perceiving things in the environment.

Selecting, Organizing, and Inferring

The three subprocesses of perception do not occur in any distinct, step-by-step sequence. They happen simultaneously as three inseparable events. Selection generally refers to how you pay attention to sensory cues. Organization describes the ways you construct and impose patterns or structure onto the stream of sensory cues you receive. Inferring is a label for the way you "go beyond" or interpret the cues that your senses select and organize.

Selecting You first decide at some level of consciousness which cues to pay attention to. Sometimes it seems that you don't have a choice about whether or not to attend to certain cues—for example, a siren, a sudden bright light out of the dark, a loud scream, or a sharp pain. But most of the time people exercise a fair amount of choice about the cues they perceive.

Selection is operating when you're rushed for time in an airport looking for the ticket counter of your airline and you don't notice many details about the people around you. Your attention is focused on signs identifying airlines and listing arrivals or departures. Or, when looking for new shoes in a shopping mall, you selectively pay attention to store signs and window displays that relate to your task and typically ignore the bed and bath shop and the espresso stand. But if you suddenly become hungry, you shift your attention to anything that smells or looks like food. You can be at a noisy party and have trouble hearing another person standing less than 2 feet away, but magically overhear your name mentioned by two people gossiping at some distance. And if you

Organizing Another way people actively participate in perception is by organizing the cues they select. You literally cannot help applying structure and stability to your world of sensations. Whenever you look at something that is vague or ambiguous in shape or size or color, for example, you continue to focus on it until you recognize what it is. What you are doing is arranging and rearranging the information you have according to a series of possible patterns or forms until the information finally makes sense to you, and you have an "Oh, so that's what it is!" experience.

You can have this experience of perceiving patterns or structures whenever you listen to music, too. How do you recognize your favorite songs? Research shows that people hear something much more than note-to-note; they tend to focus on the organized *pattern* of the sounds—the melody (Fiske & Shelley, 1984). If you've ever played the game Name That Tune, you have had the experience of suddenly recognizing not individual notes but the pattern that exists among the notes.

Once you apply a particular structure to your experience, you stabilize this perceptual version. For example, if you've been humming a particular tune for days, it's hard to think of how other songs sound, especially if they have somewhat similar patterns. The organization of perceptions helps you to make sense out of whatever is occurring. You can apply the patterns or structures to very small sensory events. Or you can develop patterns that characterize people you know. Later on in this [essay], we'll talk about how these more complex patterns are formed through stereotyping, the process of attribution, and impression formation. But for now, we just want to emphasize how important the way people organize cues is to the entire process of perception and the unavoidable effects this step has on your communication.

Inferring To infer is to conclude, judge, or go beyond evidence. So in the perception process, inferring means going beyond sensory cues to your own interpretations. The inferences or judgments you make depend on the cues you select and the ways you organize them in relation to your own assumptions, expectations, and goals.

It might sound like inference making is a risky or even foolish process because it means that you go beyond the "hard facts." In some ways it is dangerous, but it's also impossible not to do it. Just like selecting and organizing, inferring is hard-wired into human sense making.... *Meaning* is a label for the outcome of selecting, organizing, and inferring.

Our interpretations of other people and events depend on our worldviews, past experiences, goals in life, and expectations, all of which differ from culture to culture. Cultures are marked by the ways they answer such basic questions as the following:

- What is the value of the individual versus the value of the group?
- How do people advance in life, by heritage or by achievement?
- How should society be organized?
- Is the nature of a human being good or evil?

- How do humans relate to each other?
- Where does meaning lie, explicitly in the language or hidden in the context? (Hall, 2002; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961)

Many more elements can constitute a worldview of a culture, and the answers to each question lie on a continuum. In other words, worldviews are not simple; they are complex. You can value individualism, for example, when you want to make your own decisions about going to college. But you can value collectivism and the group when it comes to supporting your parents in their old age.

Worldviews influence responses to these questions and affect how people interpret cues. Saskia, for instance, was confused when she arrived on the West Coast of the United States and people smiled at her, greeted her in the streets, and talked with her on the bus. She was raised to be respectful and friendly to strangers but at the same time maintains her privacy and does not impose herself on people she does not know. It made her a little uncomfortable at first because she didn't know how to interpret certain cues she got from strangers. Was the man in the supermarket hitting on her when he smiled and asked how her day was going? Or was it just friendliness? When Saskia's parents came from Germany to visit her, her dad was impressed with "how many people she knew." He interpreted the greetings in the streets and the small talk of the checkers in the supermarket as meaning "They must know her, otherwise they wouldn't be talking to her." He was very surprised when he found out that they were strangers to Saskia. This example shows the impact of Saskia's family's worldview on their interpretations of communicative interactions.

But perceptual differences don't occur just between different ethnic or national groups—they are also gender specific. According to Malz and Borker (1982), women and men in North America interpret the same actions in conversation very differently. For example, men appear to perceive head nodding while listening as a way of indicating *agreement* with the speaker, whereas women tend to perceive head nodding as a way of signaling *that they are listening* to the speaker. For women, this is another way of indicating "I'm with you. Keep going." This difference may be at the root of a common complaint some women have about some men: "He never listens to me" (because he doesn't signal listening with head nodding) or "He's always so rational. Sometimes I just want emotional support." At the same time, frequent use of head nodding reinforces the stereotype some men have of women as unreliable because "You're always agreeing with me no matter what I say."

Socialization and biology play a role in how men and women communicate, especially when it comes to communicating emotions (Konner, 2002). Researchers say that male and female brains differ in terms of sex differences in a frontal-lobe region that is responsible for emotional reasoning. They also found that the corpus callosum, which is a mass of fibers connecting the two halves of the brain, may be larger in women's than in men's brains. If this is so, then the larger fiber mass in women's brains might help integrate the language and emotional

more than men. This does not mean that they automatically do. Socialization plays another major role in how people communicate. . . .

Now that we have explained the basic subprocesses of perception, we want to talk more about mental guidelines, or *cognitive schemata*, that help us to organize incoming information. Then we'll talk about the processes that you engage in when you make interpretations of people or things around you.

COGNITIVE SCHEMATA

In order to recognize persons and objects around us, we need mental guidelines that help us process incoming cues. These mental guidelines are called *cognitive schemata* (in the singular it's *cognitive schema*). Schemata help us to organize incoming cues about people, animals, behaviors, and objects.

Almost 80 years ago, the originator of schema theory made the point that all remembering is constructive. Rather than storing all stimuli in memory, the brain uses schemata to provide an impression of the whole. In his experiments, Bartlett (1932) used a version of the child's game Telephone, in which a message is passed along a chain of people and the story changes with each retelling. In some experiments he asked British college students to read a story from another culture, put it aside, reproduce it, and pass it on to other students. Bartlett noticed that the stories changed in systematic ways as they were passed along. This led him to suggest that in acquiring new information, humans must assimilate the new material to existing concepts or schemas. People change new information to fit their existing concepts by organizing it into previously existing mental structures. In this process, details are lost, and the knowledge fits the interpretive frames of the individual (Mayer, 1992, 230).

This explanation about how people organize new information makes sense. Saskia participated in a class where the professor played the telephone game. The students had to remember a story that included a variety of blue dragons, monks, and story characters from Asian cultures. In the end, the monks became "the dudes," the princess became a cheerleader, and the head monk a pharmacist. This does not mean that the students were careless or stupid. It means that they adapted the information to stories they had heard before. The students also ended their version of the story with "and they lived happily ever after," which did not occur in the original story but which is an ending that's very common in fairy tales that are written [in] or translated into English.

Overall, people have schemata for people, relationships, actions, and even emotions. Let's talk a little bit more about two types of these schemata: person prototypes and scripts.

Person Prototypes

A person prototype is a generalized representation of certain types of persons. It is usually based on experience and repeated personal interactions with people. Just

you think of student, professor, lawyer, gamer, or car salesperson. Person prototypes contain information about traits and verbal and nonverbal behaviors that you believe characterize a certain type of person. What are the traits and behaviors that you associate with a professor? How about a lawyer? How about a cheerleader? And how about a homeless person? Overall, prototypes help us to orient ourselves in the world. They can help us to meet people who we think we might feel comfortable with and can also help us to avoid dangerous situations. But they can also be misleading and can make us stereotype people. Why? Because they omit specific features. If you communicate based only on your person schemata, you will stay on the impersonal side of the communication scale described in Chapter 2.

Scripts

Scripts, which are structures dealing with certain sequences of action, are another type of cognitive schema. We all have a repertoire of scripts in our heads. They are usually based on experience and help us to know what happens next. Examples of scripts are riding the bus, greeting another person, attending a wedding, or going to a restaurant. Consider the "restaurant script" (Abelson, 1981). When people enter a restaurant, they know the different steps to go through to accomplish the goal of satisfying their hunger; having good conversation over a good meal, or both. This knowledge of the different steps helps us go into an almost automatic action mode so that we don't have to make decisions every single moment. So, imagine you go to a restaurant. What do you do? We guess that you would do the following in the following order: enter, be seated, order, eat, pay, tip 10 to 20 percent of the bill, and exit.

In addition, person prototypes help you to orient yourself in your restaurant environment. Near the entrance, there will usually be a person who says, "How many?" You know that this must be a host or manager. When a person comes to your table and asks, "Are you ready to order?" wearing a certain outfit—for instance, a T-shirt with the name of the restaurant on it—you know that he or she is your server (person prototype). You also know what to expect from a server and how you are supposed to behave. You know, for instance, that the server is not supposed to yell at you, sit at your table, or spill your soda on you. The server also knows that the customer (you) is not supposed to come into the kitchen or sit on the floor when eating.

Also remember that scripts can differ in different cultures. One reason that people sometimes feel insecure when they travel is that they are not familiar with certain scripts. When Saskia is in Germany, her restaurant script looks like the following: enter the restaurant, sit down, order food and drink, eat, sit for a while after eating, call the waiter to bring the check, pay the check, leave a tip that is fair, and exit. You see that there are many similarities between the U.S. and German restaurant scripts. However, there are also differences: calling the waiter to bring the check, not leaving the money on the table, and tipping conventions. In Germany, the server will usually leave you alone for a while after

In many European countries, clearing the table right after people have eaten and putting the check on the table is interpreted as rushing the customer. So, often you have to call the waiter or waitress to bring the check. Usually you pay directly and don't leave money on the table.

Tipping conventions in U.S. and German restaurant scripts also differ. In Germany, you round up a small bill to the next dollar or, when the bill is over 10 euros, you give 10 percent or so. In the United States the standard expectation is that the tip will be around 15 percent of the bill. Knowledge about different cultural scripts for certain situations makes you a more competent communicator and can also help you to avoid embarrassment or confusion.

Person prototypes and *scripts* influence how people *organize* sensory cues. In addition, there are three processes that influence how people make *interpretations*. These processes are *impression formation*, *attribution*, and *stereotyping*.

COGNITIVE PROCESSES

Impression Formation

Impression formation is the complex process of integrating or synthesizing a variety of sometimes contradictory observations into a coherent overall "picture" of a person. The impression that you form is basically a combination of traits that are similar or fit together for you. When you connect a series of related interpretations about someone's behavior, you begin to develop what's called an *implicit personality theory* about the person doing the behavior. This is simply your picture (theory) of what the person's personality "must be," based on qualities or characteristics that are implied by their behavior.

In a widely cited book about person perception, three psychologists give an excellent example of how impressions form themselves into an implicit personality theory:

Suppose you have been watching a woman at party. A lot of other people are congregated around her and you discover that she has just had a novel published. You observe her long enough to draw some tentative conclusions about her: Some of these result from attribution work; she is smart, ambitious, but particularly hard-working—conclusions you are able to draw because few people write novels and because you discover that this is her second novel and fourth published book.... You note that she is in her early 40s and reasonably attractive; her hair is a rather unnatural shade of yellow. Furthermore, she is wearing an expensive long dress. Your snap judgment is that artificial blondes who wear expensive dresses are on the frivolous side. You note that the woman is witty, and that she giggles a great deal.... Finally, you note she is consuming drinks at a rapid pace and that she has smoked several cigarettes.

What have you decided? Our novelist is intelligent, ambitious, hard-working, frivolous, witty, "giggly," and nervous. Now your work really begins. How, you might ask yourself, can a person be both hard-working and frivolous? Or perhaps she is trying to create a really good impression for someone as that

her hairstyle does not so much indicate frivolousness as a concern to create a good impression.... But why would she be nervous? She's a hit, the star of the party. Maybe she is insecure (all those giggles); nervous people and people who try to create a good impression are nervous—or so you believe. Why is she insecure? (Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979)

And so on. In order to give some consistency to all these observations and inferences, people work to organize the data they perceive into some coherent, stable impression. Although this impression is continually revised, it remains a global characterization of another person in which much of the original and inconsistent details get lost. So, depending on your past experience, you may conclude, for example, that the woman is very admirable but unusually nervous, a phony who's afraid of being discovered, or book smart but socially awkward.

There is now a considerable amount of communication research showing that *people differ in how effectively they perceive others*. For instance, researchers have discovered that stereotyping depends upon a person's mental state. If someone has high anxiety and tries to suppress stereotypic thinking, stereotyping may actually increase (Hall & Crisp, 2003). You probably have experienced this yourself. If you are traveling in a foreign country and people told you before you left to "never leave anything unattended because people steal there all the time," you may become tense and see every person around you as a potential thief.

Some people generalize and categorize more than others, and thus tend to contribute more to impersonal rather than interpersonal communication events. Their talk is *position centered* because it focuses on social roles and norms rather than the unique characteristics of individuals.

Other communicators seem better able to use the discriminatory power of perception and to note fine distinctions between one type of behavior and another. They appear to be more flexible in the perceptions they construct of others, using a higher number and more types of categories. These more sophisticated social perceivers are more likely to engage in more communication toward the right-hand end of the impersonal-interpersonal scale. These communicators are sensitive to perceptual features across a variety of different types of social situations, which makes their communication much more *person centered*. In other words, position-centered communication is nearer the left end of the continuum, and person-centered communication is nearer the right end.

Attribution

A second process of person perception is called *attribution*. When people form attributions, they devise theories or explanations about other people's behavior that provide a way of making sense out of whatever is occurring (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). Often, this means assigning a cause or intention to the behavior (Kelley, 1972). For instance, a student might come late to class and the instructor might think, "That student is lazy." In the same situation a different instructor might think, "Must have been a lot of traffic today." Each

the student's behavior. The attributions also provide the instructor with some sense that he or she can predict how the student will behave in the future. When you can devise explanations for how people behave and predictions of their future behavior, you can operate with much more certainty about what is happening in a particular situation.

Notice how one of the two causes or reasons the instructor assigned to the student's behavior is anchored in this student's personality ("lazy") and the other is anchored in external factors ("traffic"). These are the response options people commonly select from: You attribute the cause of the behavior either to a character trait, mood, or disposition (*internal factors*) or to the situation (*external factors*), or to both (Heider, 1958; Rotter, 1966). When your attributions emphasize internal factors, you're more likely to interpret what happened as the person's fault or responsibility. When someone else makes mistakes, people tend to attribute the behavior to internal causes. So, for instance, imagine you're giving a presentation. You have worked hard for weeks and are very nervous. A friend has promised to come and give you mental and emotional support during the presentation. You start your presentation and realize that your friend is not there. He walks in 10 minutes late, which makes you think, "I'm not worth his time. My buddy let me down." You attribute his behavior to internal causes instead of wondering whether he got stuck in traffic.

By contrast, when people make mistakes themselves, they tend to attribute their behavior to external causes. So, when you come late to class, you might automatically offer an excuse that attributes your being late to external causes, such as "The bus didn't show up" or "My roommate had a panic attack this morning and I had to drive him to the hospital." The reason why people attribute personal mistakes to external causes is to save face and keep themselves from becoming vulnerable.

If you remember what we said about fault and blame, you'll probably get a sense of why attributions can be dangerous. Although attributions about others can help guide understanding, they also often interfere with your ability to see alternative reasons for why people behave the way they do. For instance, one researcher (Manusov, 1990) studied what happens when couples playing the game Trivial Pursuit have to make sense of their partner's obviously positive or negative nonverbal behavior. One member of each couple was recruited to act positively at one point in the game and to act negatively at another point. The study showed that couples who were happy with their relationship and each other tended to attribute positive behavior to internal causes in their partners. In contrast, unhappy couples made more external attributions. So, in this study, a person's overall attitude toward his or her partner significantly affected the attributions made about the partner's nonverbal behavior.

Stereotyping

A stereotype is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2003) as a "preconceived, and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which..."

etc., an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type." In other words, a stereotype is a category that people apply to other people, often based on their group membership. These categories can include gender, ethnic or national, religious, and vocational groups. Overall, stereotypes are a way that people make sense of the world and orient themselves to the people around them.

Two important dimensions of stereotypes are the following: (1) They can be positive or negative and (2) they can vary in intensity. Positive stereotypes are categorizations that evoke favorable associations, such as "Asians are good at math," "Chinese are polite," "African women are beautiful," or "African Americans are athletic." Negative stereotypes are unfavorable categorizations of a whole group of people—for example, "East Coasters are rude," "Arabs are terrorists," or "football players are lazy students." In addition to direction, stereotypes can also vary in intensity—the strength with which the stereotype is maintained. Families and peer groups affect the intensity of most people's stereotypes (Tan et al., 2001). If you continually heard when you were growing up that "foreigners" are bad because they take jobs away from native-born citizens, you are likely to believe it and may even be suspicious of foreigners.

You've undoubtedly been told many times that stereotyping is dangerous and stereotypes are bad. In many ways, this is true. Racism and sexism continue, to a considerable degree, because of stereotypes. Communication based on stereotyped perceptions of people will fall on the impersonal side of the impersonal–interpersonal continuum.

On the other hand, some stereotyping is unavoidable, and in some cases it can be helpful. When you're walking alone at night in a city, it can be legitimate and helpful to stereotype the person matching your route and your pace as a threat. The natural human tendency to categorize influences all perceptions, so it is impossible to stop stereotyping completely. You just have to be careful not to let your stereotypes become too rigid. You can do that by being aware that people sometimes put other people into boxes and by trying to see the person with his or her individual characteristics behind the stereotype.

In addition, researchers have found that communication is not always influenced by stereotypes as much as it is affected by the interaction itself (Manusov & Hedge, 1993; Manusov, Winchitz, & Manning, 1997). For instance, researchers asked how neutral, positive, and negative stereotypes about people from other cultures affect the ways in which people communicate and the judgments they make about their conversation partners. So far, they've found that stereotype-based expectancies do affect people's evaluations of their conversation partners from other cultures, but they also found that what happens during the actual conversation is more important than the stereotype. People base their judgments of others more on facial pleasantness, fluency in conversation, relaxed posture, and similar vocal cues than on the stereotypes that they bring to the interaction (Manusov, Winchitz, & Manning, 1997). This evidence indicates

be most influential, these generalizations don't completely control how people respond.

PRACTICAL PERCEPTION PROBLEMS

As part of our continuing effort to blend theory and practice, we want to end this [essay] with a description of five specific difficulties that you might encounter in your perception processes. Each grows out of the complexity and culture dependence of the perception process. Each can also affect where your communication is on the impersonal-interpersonal scale.

Fast Thinking

One problem people have with the selection part of perception is that, when listening to someone, we have a great deal of spare time. In a normal conversation, native English speakers tend to speak from 115 to 130 words per minute. But normal thinking speed—if it can be quantified this way—exceeds 500 words per minute. This means that people listening to speech have a lot of extra time to get perceptually sidetracked by other cues or by their own thoughts. You might think of this perception problem as the challenge of what to do with this free time. Since it's harder to concentrate on another person's ideas than it is to focus on our own, we often take the easy way out and spend our free time thinking about our own concerns. The listening skills we describe in the next chapter clarify what else might be done with this free time.

Avoiding Overload

A second reason people sometimes tune out is to preserve some control over their environment. We are constantly bombarded with countless messages from family members, supervisors, teachers, friends, acquaintances, strangers, and the media, and if we tried to pay attention to it all, we would quickly go crazy. We can't turn off the perceptual process entirely, so we have to make decisions about the things we will attend to and the things we will let go. So sometimes we tune out to preserve our physical and emotional health. The trick is not to let the real potential of information overload force you into the habit of tuning out.

The Entertainment Factor

A third reason people sometimes fail to pay attention is that they're used to getting information in entertaining packages. Adults who grew up spending a great deal of time watching television are especially prone to expect ideas and information to come in attractive, lively, and stimulating packages with economical sound bites. If you doubt the influence of this factor, notice the way television packages the news and the way advertisers on radio, television, and in magazines present their products. Awareness of this expectation can go a long

In addition to these three selection problems, there are at least two types of problems that can interfere with the kind of person perception that promotes interpersonal communicating.

Snap Judgments

Snap judgments are inferences that are "usually rather immediate and do not involve complex cognitive processes" (Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979, 20). They are the most limited kind of stereotype people make about others. Snap judgments are usually based on the physical characteristics of the other person and a very limited set of observations of their behavior. In the earlier description of the novelist at the cocktail party, the snap judgment is that "artificial blondes who wear expensive dresses are on the frivolous side." Snap judgments result when people evaluate whether the person they're perceiving is old or young, male or female, physically able or disabled, richly or poorly dressed, from a particular culture, and under- or overweight. Occasionally a snap judgment can be useful, such as when you're aggressively approached by a telemarketer as you're sitting down for dinner. But most of the time snap judgments are liable to distort your understanding of what the person is saying.

Attributional Errors

Earlier we explained that people make attributions to help make sense out of someone else's behavior by assigning a cause or intention to their actions. These causes or reasons for behavior get associated with the other's personality (internal factors) or something in the situation (external factors). These often lead to oversimplified conclusions about fault and blame, which ... interfere with our ability to see communication as a collaborative process. One form of distortion happens when people unequally balance internal and external factors and commit what's called the *fundamental attribution error* and the *ultimate attribution error*.

The fundamental attribution error is the mistaken tendency people have to attribute others' behaviors to internal, rather than external, causes. The ultimate attribution error assumes that, as we mentioned, people's negative behavior is caused by internal factors and that their positive behavior is caused by external factors. This means that there is a tendency to underestimate the impact of situational factors in producing another's behavior and to overestimate the role of personality factors (Kelley, 1972).

For instance, the person evaluating her *own* tendency to drive over the speed limit or be late for an appointment would be likely to attribute her actions to the situation—she is just "keeping up with traffic" or "unavoidably delayed by traffic signals and detours." But the fundamental attribution error happens when she fails to give others the benefit of this explanation and instead accounts for *their* speeding and lateness as "irresponsibility" or "carelessness."

One example of the ultimate attribution error concerns perceptions of obesity.

to internal, controllable causes. Thus, those who are significantly overweight are often regarded as having no self-control and are therefore subject to blame and ridicule (Rush, 1998). Obese people are also usually viewed as unattractive, sad, depressed, and unlikely (Hiller, 1981; Triplett, 2003). Many people who think that obesity is the fault of the individual fall into the trap of the ultimate attribution error: They assign what is perceived to be negative behavior to internal personality characteristics. They also commit this error when they conclude that weight loss is caused by a good diet and the help of other people instead of asking themselves whether the weight loss also has something to do with the strong will of the person. It can help to avoid the fundamental attribution error by remembering that others' actions—just like our own—are responses to both internal and external factors.

SUMMARY

Our main point about perception is that the ways people select, organize, and make inferences about others affect the ways people communicate. Person perception by its very nature forms the basis of the "reality" you share with others every time you make contact with them. By becoming aware of the ways you perceive others, you can learn to generalize less, that is, to be more sensitive to the unique and distinctive features others make available to you as you communicate with them. Increasing your perceptual sensitivity is a major step in making the inhaling part of your communicating more effective.

Up until now, though, we've been treating the parts of perception that are considered cognitive or mental processes as occurring largely in your head. If we stayed with just this simple a picture, we would be seriously misrepresenting the way perception works. Why? Because, as we said before, listening is where the rubber of perception meets the road of communication. Listening is the concrete manifestation-in-communication of all the perceptual processes we have discussed in this chapter. When you communicate, your listening enables you to interpret (select, organize, and make inferences about) what your conversation partners are saying and doing. These perceptions change as you collaboratively build meaning....

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain what it means to say that perception is "a social and cognitive process."
2. How does a person's culture affect his or her perceiving?
3. Cognitive schemata are _____ that help us to _____ incoming information.
4. This reading discusses two ways people organize information and three ways we make inferences I label them _____.

5. What is an implicit personality theory?
6. What is the fundamental attribution error? What's the ultimate attribution error? How can such errors be avoided?

PROBES

1. How does this discussion of perception affect your definition of what it means to be "objective"?
2. Given the influence of person prototypes and scripts, how can you make your communicating responsive to the *particular*—as contrasted with the general—situation?
3. Explain the relationship between person-centered versus position-centered talk and impersonal versus interpersonal communicating.
4. "Perception" is a label for cognitive inhaling processes, and "listening" is a label for social inhaling processes. Explain.

REFERENCES

- Abelson, R. P. (1981). Psychological status of the script concept. *American Psychologist*, 36, 715-729.
- Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Fiske, S. T., & Shelley, E. T. (1984). *Social cognition*. New York: Random House.
- Hall, B. J. (2002). *Among cultures: The challenge of communication*. New York: Wadsworth.
- Hall, N., & Crisp, R. (2003). Anxiety-induced response perseverance and stereotype change. *Current Research in Social Psychology*, 8, 242-253.
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Kelley, H. H. (1972). Casual schemata and the attribution process. In E. E. Jones, D. E. Kanouse, H. H. Kelley, R. E. Nisbett, S. Valins, & B. Weiner (Eds.), *Attribution: Perceiving the causes of behavior*. Morristown, NJ: General Learning Press.
- Kelley, H. H. (1973). The process of causal attribution. *American Psychologist*, 28, 107-128.
- Kluckhohn, F. R., & Strodtbeck, F. L. (1961). *Variations in value orientations*. Evanston, IL: Row Peterson.
- Korner, M. (2002). *The tangled wing: Biological constraints on the human spirit*. 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Maltz, D. N., & Borker, R. A. (1982). A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In J. J. Gumperz (Ed.), *Language and social identity*.

- Manusov, V. (1990). An application of attribution principles to nonverbal behavior in romantic dyads. *Communication Monographs*, 57, 104-118.
- Manusov, V., & Hegde, R. (1993). Communicative outcomes of stereotype-based expectancies: An observational study of cross-cultural dyads. *Communication Quarterly*, 41, 338-354.
- Manusov, M., Winchitz, M., & Manning, L. M. (1997). Acting out our minds: Incorporating behavior into models of stereotype-based expectancies for cross-cultural interactions. *Communication Monographs*, 64, 119-139.
- Mayer, R. E. (1992). *Thinking, problem-solving, cognition*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Freeman.
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal vs. external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80, 609.
- Rush, L. L. (1998). Affective reactions to multiple social stigmas. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 138, 421-430.
- Schneider, D. J., Hastorf, A. H., & Ellsworth, P. C. (1979). *Person perception*. 2nd ed. (pp. 20-26). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

It's Only Skin Deep: Stereotyping and Totalizing Others

Julia T. Wood

Julia Wood teaches in the department of communication studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, does research on gender and communication, and has published several interpersonal communication texts. This chapter comes from a recent book that she dedicates to enhancing its readers' understanding of "different meanings that people may attribute to what they say and do." In her book, Wood emphasizes how diversity can contribute to misunderstanding and how awareness and acceptance of diversity can help improve understanding.

As the subtitle of this selection says, this is a discussion of stereotyping, one of the most familiar and unfortunate features of the way we perceive people. As the subtitle also suggests, the key concept in this chapter is "totalizing." Wood explains that this word describes "communication that emphasizes one aspect of a person above all others." Totalizing means thinking and acting as if a single aspect of a person is the totality of that person. So calling Spike Lee a "black filmmaker" spotlights his race in a way that makes it the dominant feature that's being noticed. The same thing happens when people talk of "that short guy you dated," "a Japanese friend of mine," and "his deaf sister."

"It's Only Skin Deep" from *But I Thought You Meant...* *Misunderstandings in Human Communication* by Julia T. Wood. Copyright © 1998 by Mayfield Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies.

Wood makes the obvious—though important—point that totalizing has negative effects on the people who are its target. She also describes some of the effects of totalizing on the people who do it. Basically, when we engage in totalizing, we cripple our perceiving by forcing ourselves to look through blinders. As Wood puts it, "we tend to perceive others through the labels we use to describe them."

One reason people stereotype or totalize is that it's easier to deal with a one-dimensional person than someone with many different important qualities. Another reason is that several automatic human brain processes produce classifications and generalizations. It would be impossible for us constantly to notice every detail of everything available to our senses, so our brain automatically classifies what we perceive to help keep us from going nuts.

But when we perceive people, this natural process can lead us to operate on the basis of what are called "implicit personality theories" (this same idea was discussed in the previous reading). As both readings note, these are generalizations about groups of qualities that seem "obviously" to go together—like being overweight, happy, lazy, and undisciplined. Problems arise when we perceive one of these features—that a person is overweight, for example—and our implicit theory about the rest of the personality fills in other features that may or may not be parts of who the person is.

Wood discusses some of Dawn Braithwaite's research about how totalizing applies to people with disabilities. Even that term—*disabled*—is often hurtful because it makes it easier for others to reduce the amputee or the deaf or partly sighted person to the negative status of being incomplete or flawed in some vital way. You can read an article on disabled communication in Chapter 11.

Near the end of this short reading, Wood includes 10 examples of statements that often come from well-meaning people but that are usually heard by the people they're directed to as totalizing or stereotyping. This list and the other ideas in this selection should help sensitize you to whatever tendencies you have to rely on stereotypes in your communication.

MAIN IDEAS

- *Totalizing* communication is communication that emphasizes one aspect of a person above all others.
- Totalizing damages both the people who do it and the people to whom it's done.
- Stereotyping and totalizing grow out of the natural and helpful cognitive activities of classification and generalization.
- One form of totalizing defines individuals by their membership in a specific group; another reduces individuals to one aspect of their identity.
- When we think stereotypically, we expect people to conform to our perceptions of the group to which we assign them.
- When we mark an individual as an exception to his or her group, we reveal our own stereotypes.

I want to be known as a talented young filmmaker. That should be first. But the

Those are Spike Lee's words. In an interview with Diane McDowell, reporter for *Time* magazine, the gifted filmmaker lamented the reality that most people see and respond to his blackness more than his other qualities and achievements. Sometimes, awareness of Lee's blackness overrides all other perceptions of him.

Distinguished historian John Hope Franklin made the same point in an interview with Mark McGurl, reporter for the *New York Times*. According to Franklin, many people assume that because he is an African American historian, he must study African Americans. He is often introduced as the author of 12 books on black history. In reality, Franklin points out, he is *not* a historian only of African Americans. His specialty is the history of the South and, as he notes, that history includes both whites and blacks. In fact, several of his books have focused primarily on whites in the South. Franklin has been elected president of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Southern Historical Association—none of which is specifically an African American organization. Still, many people perceive his skin color above all else and they assume his ethnicity defines his work.

The misunderstanding of identity and achievement that Spike Lee and John Hope Franklin confront is not unique to people of minority races. Women report that they are often asked to serve on committees. Many times the person asking says, "We need a woman on the committee" or "We think you can provide the woman's perspective on the issues." Like Lee and Franklin, professional women may feel that all their accomplishments and abilities are erased by those who ask them to be "the woman on the committee." The language in the request communicates that all that is noticed is biological sex: She can fill the "woman slot" on the committee.

In this [reading], we focus on communication that highlights one aspect of a person—usually race, sex, sexual orientation, disability, or economic status. We discuss common instances of such communication and explore how it fosters misunderstandings and often offense.

UNDERSTANDING THE MISUNDERSTANDING

Scholars use the term *totalize* to describe communication that emphasizes one aspect of a person above all others. When someone totalizes, he or she acts as if a single facet of an individual is the totality of that person or as if that single aspect is all that's important about the person. For example, describing Spike Lee as a *black* filmmaker spotlights his race as what is worthy of attention. Calling John Hope Franklin a *black* historian emphasizes his race and obscures his professional expertise and accomplishments. Asking a professional to provide the *woman's* perspective highlights sex as the criterion for serving on committees. Referring to a person as *gay* stresses sexual orientation and obscures all the person's other qualities. Describing people as *blue collar* or *white collar* makes

their class, wealth, and aspirations also about them instead.

Totalizing affects both those who do it and those who are its targets. When we feel that someone totalizes us, we are likely to be offended and resentful. We may also be hurt that we have been reduced to a single part of our identity—perhaps not the part most important to us in a particular context. These feelings create barriers to open, healthy communication and comfortable relationships.

Less obvious but no less important is the impact of totalizing on people who engage in it. Language shapes our perceptions by calling certain things to our attention. When we use language that focuses our attention on race, class, sex, or any [other] single aspect of another person, we limit our perception of that person. In other words, we tend to perceive others through the labels we use to describe them.

Kenneth Burke, a distinguished critic of language and literature, observes that language simultaneously reflects, selects, and deflects. In his book *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke writes: "Any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (p. 45). Burke means that the words we use to reflect our perceptions select certain aspects of what we are describing while simultaneously deflecting, or neglecting, other aspects of what we are describing. When we select *woman*, *black*, *gay*, and so forth to describe people, other aspects of those people are deflected (neglected or added as an afterthought). Consequently, we may not see in others whatever our labels deflect. Thus, we are unlikely to interact with those others in their wholeness.

Most of us wouldn't intentionally reduce another person to one aspect of who he or she is, but it happens. One motive for totalizing is the desire for reducing uncertainty. We tend to be uncomfortable when we are unsure about others and situations. To ease discomfort, we often attempt to reduce our uncertainty about others and circumstances. One way to do this is to define others as belonging to a group about which we have definite ideas (although the ideas may not be accurate). It is easier to think of Spike Lee as black than to try to perceive him as a unique individual who is—among other things—male, young, a filmmaker, educated, and African American.

In the classic book *The Nature of Prejudice*, psychologist Gordon Allport observed that stereotyping and prejudice grow out of normal—not deviant or unusual—cognitive activities. Specifically, Allport identified classification and generalization as commonplace mental activities that can foster stereotypes and prejudice. One reason we use stereotypes, then, is that they reduce our uncertainty by grouping people into broad classes that obscure individual characteristics.

A second reason we stereotype is that we rely on what psychologists call implicit personality theory. Most of us have certain unspoken and perhaps unrecognized assumptions about qualities that go together in personalities. Many people assume that attractive individuals are more extroverted, intelligent, and socially skilled than less attractive individuals. Another common implicit personality theory (one that research does not support) is that people

we attribute to others a constellation of qualities that we associate with a particular quality we have noticed.

If we meet an individual who is overweight (in our judgment), we may assume that the person meets our implicit personality theory of overweight people and is happy, lazy, and undisciplined. Our implicit personality theories may also lead us to think that a nice-looking person must be intelligent, outgoing, and socially skilled. When we rely on our implicit personality theories, we latch onto one quality of another person—often a characteristic we can see, such as race, sex, or weight—and attribute to the person other qualities that we perceive as consistent with the quality we have identified. . . .

One form of totalizing . . . involves defining individuals by their membership in a specific group. Years ago sociologist Louis Wirth conducted classic studies of racial prejudice. One of his more important conclusions was that when we perceive people primarily in terms of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, we tend to think about them and interact with them in terms of our stereotypes of race, regardless of their unique qualities, talents, and so forth. In other words, their individuality is lost, submerged in our preconceptions of the group to which we assign them.

A second form of totalizing reduces individuals to one quality or aspect of their identities. This type of totalizing is evident in some of the language used to describe persons who have disabilities. How we perceive and label people with disabilities is the research focus of Dawn Braithwaite, a communication scholar at Arizona State University West. From interviews with persons who have disabilities, Braithwaite learned that the term *disabled person* is likely to offend. The reason is that the term suggests that their personhood is disabled—that they are somehow inadequate or diminished as persons simply because they have disabilities. One of the people Braithwaite interviewed asserted, “I am a person like anyone else” (1994, p. 151). Another interviewee said, “If anyone refers to me as an amputee, that is guaranteed to get me madder than hell! I don’t deny the leg amputation, but I am me. I am a whole person” (1994, p. 151).

Individuals who have disabilities have been vocal in resisting efforts to label them *disabled*. They point out that calling them disabled emphasizes their disabilities above all else. “We’re people who have disabilities. People first,” a deaf student explained to me. When someone with a disability is described as disabled, we highlight what they cannot do rather than all they can do. . . .

When we think stereotypically, we expect people to conform to our perceptions of the group to which we assign them. Sometimes, however, we meet someone who doesn’t fit our stereotypes of the group to which we think he or she belongs. Have you ever said or heard the phrases “woman doctor,” “male nurse,” or “woman lawyer”? Notice how they call attention to the sex of the doctor, nurse, or lawyer. Have you ever heard or used the phrases “man doctor,” “woman nurse,” or “man lawyer”? Probably not—because it is considered normal for men to be doctors and lawyers and women to be nurses. Many people perceive it as unusual for women to practice law or medicine or men to be nurses. “Woman doctor,” “male nurse,” and “woman lawyer” emphasize the sex of

individuals as the element worthy of notice. The phrases also reflect stereotyped views of the professional groups.

When we mark an individual as an exception to his or her group, we unknowingly reveal our own stereotypes. In fact, we may reinforce them because marking an individual who doesn’t conform to the stereotype as unusual leaves our perceptions of the group unchanged. All we do is remove the “exceptional individual” from the group. Consider these statements:

White manager to black manager:

“You really are exceptional at your job.”
[Translation: Black women aren’t usually successful.]

Male professional to female professional:

“You don’t think like a woman.”
[Translation: Most women don’t think like professionals.]

Able-bodied individual to person in wheelchair:

“I’m amazed at how well you get around.”
[Translation: I assume that people who use wheelchairs don’t get out much.]

Upper-class person to working-class person:

“It’s remarkable that you take college classes.”
[Translation: Most working-class people aren’t interested in higher education.]

White person to African American:

“I can’t believe you don’t like to dance.”
[Translation: I think that all blacks dance, have rhythm.]

Heterosexual to lesbian:

“I think it’s great that you have some male friends.”
[Translation: Most lesbians hate men.]

Homeowner to maid:

“You speak so articulately.”
[Translation: I assume most domestic workers don’t speak well and/or aren’t educated.]

White man to black man:

“I never think of you as black.”
[Translation: You don’t fit my views of blacks; you’re an exception to my (negative) stereotype of blacks.]

Christian to Jew:

“I’m surprised at how generous you are.”
[Translation: Most Jews are tight with money.]

African American to white person:

“You’re not as stuffy as most of your people.”
[Translation: Most whites are stuffy, or up-tight,

Would any of the above statements be made to a member of the speaker's group? Would a heterosexual say to a heterosexual woman, "It's great that you have some male friends"? Would a white man say to another white man, "I never think of you as white"? Would a maid say to his or her employer, "You speak so articulately"? Would a white person say to another white person, "I can't believe you don't like to dance"? In each case, it's unlikely. By changing the speakers in the statements, we see how clearly the statements reflect stereotypes of groups.

Communicating that you perceive an individual as an exception to his or her group invites two dilemmas. First, it expresses your perception that the person belongs to a group about which you have preconceptions. Understandably, this may alienate the other person or make her or him defensive. The person may feel compelled to defend or redefine the group from which you have removed that individual. An African American might, for instance, say "Lots of blacks don't enjoy dancing." A working-class person might inform an upper-class person that "education has always been a priority in my family."

A second possible response to communication that marks an individual as an exception to her or his group is the effort to deny identification with the group. A professional woman may strive not to appear feminine to avoid being judged by her colleagues' negative perceptions of women. A white person may try to "talk black" or play music by black artists to prove he or she isn't like most whites. The group stereotypes—no matter how inaccurate—are left unchallenged.

Whether individuals defend or redefine their groups or separate themselves from the groups, one result is the same: The possibilities for open communication and honest relationships are compromised.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- Define *totalizing* in your own words, and give an example from your own experience of how totalizing can affect communication.
- Specifically how does totalizing affect the person who *does* it?
- Define and give an example of *implicit personality theory*.
- Use Wood's article to explain why many female attorneys do not like to be called a "woman lawyer."
- Explain the point Wood is making when she asks, "Would a white man say to another white man, 'I never think of you as white'?"

PROBES

- On the first day of class, the instructor says in a genuinely pleased way, "It's great to have so many persons of color in the class." Explain how this can be heard as a totalizing statement.
- Wood quotes Gordon Allport to make the point that stereotyping is a normal, natural activity. But if it's normal and natural, then how much sense does it make to encourage people not to do it?

3. Privately, if you prefer, or with a classmate, if you're willing, explore some of your own implicit personality theories. For example, if you're not thinking carefully about it, what qualities do you presume a person has who is (a) a teenage African-American male, (b) a female athlete, (c) a 20-something gay male, (d) a middle-aged female nurse?
4. If it's obviously true that a person does not have normal sight, hearing, intelligence, or mobility, what is the problem with referring to that person as "disabled"?
5. What's the connection between the main point made in this reading and the impersonal–interpersonal continuum discussed in Chapter 2?

REFERENCES

- Allport, G. (1979). *The nature of prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Braithwaite, D. (1994). Viewing persons with disabilities as a culture. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (7th ed., pp. 148–154). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McDowell, D. (1989, July 17). He's got to have his way. *Time*, pp. 92–94.
- McGurl, M. (1990, June 3). That's history, not black history. *New York Times Book Review*, 13.
- Wirth, L. (1945). The problem of minority groups. In R. Linton (Ed.), *The science of man* (pp. 347–372). New York: Columbia University Press.

Mindful Listening

Rebecca Z. Shafir

Rebecca Shafir, the author of this essay, reports that she has learned a great deal about communication and listening from Zen Buddhist philosophy. As you may know, Zen is an Eastern philosophy that was first imported into the United States in the 1960s. Since then, it has sometimes been stereotyped as silly, New Age thinking. But those who seriously study this philosophy know that it offers westerners insights and guidelines that can substantially improve our communicating.

One contribution from this and other Buddhist writings is the concept of "mindfulness." This is a label for a way of focusing your attention that can produce significant benefits. I have included this reading in order to clarify what "mindfulness" means and how it can improve your listening.

"Mindful Listening" by Rebecca Z. Shafir from *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction*, pp. 27, 33–35, 105–115, and 248. Copyright © 2000. Reprinted by permission of Quest Books.

Initially, Shafir characterizes mindful listening as the ability to receive the spoken word accurately, retain information, sustain attention, attend to your own responsive speech, and encourage the speaker. She emphasizes the importance of a strong intent to assure a positive outcome—which means that mindfulness is not a permanent state, because no one has this strong positive intent all the time.

Mindfulness is the opposite of multitasking, which is a skill that many contemporary people value very highly. As Shafir writes, "Our environment with its constant bombardment of stimuli challenges your innate ability to relax and focus completely on one task at a time." This bombardment can encourage mindlessness, an orientation that prevents effective listening.

Shafir's discussion of the work of one of her Buddhist mentors, Thich Nhat Hanh, emphasizes both the simplicity and the unusualness of mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh describes two ways to wash the dishes. "The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes." The first is mindless, because when you wash the dishes this way, your focus is not on the present but on the future—what the dish washing will accomplish. The second is mindful because your focus is on what is currently occurring, here and now. Buddhist philosophy emphasizes the importance and value of attending to the present—being mindful.

This simple example makes it clear that many Western cultural values discourage mindfulness. North Americans are praised for our abilities to "get things done," solve problems, and build impressive structures and systems. These capabilities are undeniably productive. But this cultural emphasis on constant accomplishment can divert us from important present-tense experiences: enjoying a discovery with a child, profoundly appreciating a beautiful view, taking in the aroma of a landscape, listening closely to a friend. Zen reminds us of the complementary value of these mindful experiences. One of its slogans is "Don't just do something. Sit there!"

It is important and useful, I believe, to take this advice about mindfulness into your listening. Most of us are too busy to do this all the time. But we should at least have available to us, as one of our important communication options, the ability to listen mindfully.

MAIN IDEAS

- A good listener can be defined as one who is *mindful* of the wide spectrum of listening skills that include accurate receiving, retaining information, sustaining attention, attending to your own speech, and encouraging the person you are listening to.
- Mindful listening can be applied in many different kinds of listening, including information seeking and processing, evaluating, and therapeutic or empathic listening.
- Mindfulness is focused attention on the present; it is the opposite of mindlessness, where attention is focused on the future—what's next.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk, has written useful advice about mindfulness.
- One kind of mindless listening involves planning what you are going to say next.
- Mindfulness can require practice to develop "one-pointed" concentration; this is the opposite of multitasking.
- Mindful listening can helpfully minimize interpersonal conflict.

How tiresome it is to leave a performance review with the comment written in bold print: "**Your listening skills need work.**" It is a déjà vu experience for many of us, one that we can easily recall from numerous early sources: our parents, scout leaders, coaches, and teachers. Since our youth these words of wisdom have come in various forms. For example: "Stop talking and pay attention," as if when we stop talking we somehow start paying attention, or more indirectly, "Maybe you should get your hearing checked." When we are told to listen up, what exactly does that mean? How do we know if we are really listening (and paying attention) or just acting like we are? How can we convince others, like the boss, that our listening skills are deserving of a promotion? Would we know a good listener if we met one? How far are we from being considered a good listener?

... If you were to poll various individuals and ask what it means to be a good listener, you would hear several versions. Here are some examples. Sales consultant Michael Leppo describes good listening as the ability to hear attentively. Michelle Lucas, a psychotherapist, says that good listening is a process of showing respect and validating a person's worth. The International Listening Association defines listening as "the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages." Others say it is simply the ability to understand and remember what was said. Ralph G. Nichols, one of the founding fathers of listening studies, said, "Listening is an inside job—inside action on the part of the listener." This suggests that good listening is the ability to get into the shoes of the speaker in order to see his side of the issue.

... I will define a good listener as one who is *mindful* of the wide spectrum of listening skills. These include the ability to

- receive the spoken word accurately, interpret the whole message (the words, gestures, and facial expressions) in an unbiased manner;
- retain the information for future use;
- sustain attention to the spoken word at will; listening is a process that occurs over time;
- attend to *your* speech and be sensitive to the accuracy of the message and the possible interpretations that could be derived from it; and
- encourage a speaker to speak from his [or her] heart and expound on his or her ideas without censure. This makes your speaker feel valued and respected.

... Mindful listening is already a part of you. However, it does require a desire to listen. A desire to listen involves a curiosity for new information and a willingness to pay more respect to your speaker. If your desire is to build stronger personal and professional relationships, a degree of compassion is a basic requirement to becoming a better listener.

Mindful listening is the mind and body working together to communicate. Furthermore, it does not require two functioning ears to listen in a mindful way.

attend mindfully to the message, whether the message is spoken or signed, is to perceive as closely as possible the intent and experience of the speaker.

Mindful listening can be applied to the wide continuum of listening types:

- information processing
- information seeking
- critical or evaluative listening
- therapeutic listening
- empathetic or compassionate listening
- small-talk listening ...

MINDFULNESS: LISTENING IN THE MOMENT

Concentration is the key to performing *any* meaningful activity well. It is heartening to know that we innately possess the ability to concentrate. It does not require any special training, just frequent application. Think of an activity that requires complete, sustained attention, such as taking an important test, driving in a snowstorm, or playing chess. Your focus on these tasks is propelled by a strong intent to assure a positive outcome—to excel in school, get home safely, or choose the best move. However, the more you concentrate on the *process*, the more positive will be the outcome. Reading each test item carefully, looking for tricky wordings, and rechecking your answers increases your chance of scoring a high grade. If you were to think of nothing but getting an A, the end result would not be so positive.

On the other hand, there are activities that once required a similar level of concentration, but have now become mindless, like sweeping the floor or grocery shopping. These rote activities give the brain a chance to unwind and relax. You can think about other things and even perform other tasks simultaneously: you can eat *and* read, surf the Internet *and* listen to music. These combinations can be very enjoyable. However, you may tend to overuse this ability to multitask and misuse it when it is necessary to focus your attention on a single activity, such as listening. Our environment with its constant bombardment of stimuli challenges your innate ability to relax and focus completely on one task at a time.

Not long ago, I was in an airport with an hour wait for my plane, and I met a former high-school classmate whom I hadn't seen in more than 20 years. We decided to go across the street to a nice hotel for something to drink while we caught up on each other's lives. Outside the bar was a sign that invited us to COME IN AND RELAX. As soon as we were inside, we noticed five TVs, all tuned to different channels! In addition, there was noise from the nearby kitchen and a radio playing behind the bar. Some patrons at tables tried to maintain conversation-like activities while their eyes shifted from TV to TV. It was dizzying! It took every bit of our concentration to hear each other and even more effort to discuss anything in depth. It occurred to me that an intensely distracting environment is regarded by many people as "relaxation."

You lull yourself into a false sense of competency when you think you can make dinner, plan that sales meeting, and help your son with his homework, all at the same time. You may finish all these tasks in 30 minutes or less, but how is the quality? When you look closely, dinner was just edible, you overlooked two of the seven main points for the meeting, and your son is able to spell only six of the ten words on his vocabulary homework. Since the goal is to *finish* these tasks so that you can rush onto the next one, the results are less than satisfactory. You feel depleted and inadequate.

Such mindlessness becomes a habit and begins to creep into tasks that require your full concentration. How often do you look back at the week, the month, the year, and wonder where the time went? Many of us can't remember because most of the time we were in a fog of preoccupation with the past or planning the future. Our attention was scattered all over the place, and the quality of our actions was just good enough to get by. Substandard performance on any task results in low self-esteem and lack of fulfillment.

Ekhnath Easwaran, author of *Words to Live By: Inspiration for Every Day*, speaks of the dangers of mindlessness: "There is no joy in work which is hurried, which is done when we are at the mercy of pressures from outside, because such work is compulsive. All too often hurry clouds judgment. More and more, to save time, a person tends to think in terms of pat solutions and to take shortcuts and give uninspired performances."

When mindlessness teams up with personal barriers, our ability to concentrate on the message is out of reach. The antidote is to challenge those distractions and focus on the process—establishing a warm relationship with another person, seeing the other's view, and accepting it as valid whether you agree with it or not. Focus on process ensures the favorable outcome you hope for—repeat sales, cooperation from difficult people, better recall.... If, however, you still find that your barriers overpower your ability to focus, then you need to spend a bit more time thinking them through.

In my search for a practical means of improving the ability to concentrate and listen more effectively, I came across the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk. After studying his book, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, I found that my ability to listen had become richer. The essence of Zen is to be in the present. Thich Nhat Hanh describes mindfulness as keeping your consciousness alive to the present reality. Living the present moment of any activity, paying attention to the process, lend themselves to a quality outcome.

A good way to experience mindfulness is to choose a task you typically rush through, like washing the dishes. According to Thich Nhat Hanh, "There are two ways to wash the dishes. The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes." He says that if we hurry through the dishes, thinking only about the cup of tea that awaits us, then we are not washing the dishes to wash the dishes; we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact, we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. "If we can't

tea either. While drinking the cup of tea, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands."

When you are listening to another but planning your own agenda at the same time, you are really talking to yourself and therefore not truly listening. You have escaped the present in order to be in the future. You may be physically present, but mentally you are bouncing back and forth between past events and future expectations.

Another challenge to mindful listening is that the average person speaks at a rate of 125 words per minute, yet we can process up to 500 words per minute. During that lag time, you can think about your to-do list or you can listen mindfully by using that time to summarize what the speaker has said so far or see the possibilities in what the speaker is proposing. You can also note the emphasis in his voice or the degree of concern in his gestures and facial expressions. When you are in the speaker's movie, you use your resources to be a competent, intelligent listener.

If you have difficulty putting your thoughts, judgments, and other noise aside while you are trying to get into the speaker's movie, you may need some practice staying in the present. Poor listeners have little patience for the present. Thoughts of yesterday and tomorrow are more enticing. Your barriers have little tolerance for information or ideas that are contrary or too lengthy. Impatience shows itself when you fall out of the speaker's movie or want to interrupt....

Time spent listening, consulting, teaching, or working in the present can be just as memorable as those moments in your life when time appeared to stand still. When listening mindfully, however, your perception is heightened and you experience multilevel awareness. You are able to delve into what makes the speaker tick, how well his body language matches or contradicts his spoken message, his mood, energy level, and other subtle nuances. When you are fully absorbed in the speaker's movie, you are in the present; time appears to stand still. Mindful listening is not a trance or a hypnotic state. You are aware of your surroundings, but they are not a distraction.

The 1st-century Buddhist philosopher Ashvagosha gives a humorous account of mindful listening:

If we are listening to a friend, even if a parrot flies down and perches on his head, we should not get excited, point to the parrot, and burst out, "Excuse me for interrupting, but there's parrot on your head." We should be able to concentrate so hard on what our friend is saying that we can tell this urge, "Keep quiet and don't distract me. Afterwards I'll tell him about the bird."

He goes on to describe mindfulness as "one-pointedness." This means to focus the attention completely on one task at a time. By applying this approach to your daily tasks, you can complete the same number of tasks, only with better quality, and hence, better outcomes. Many of my students tell me they are better able to prioritize activities and eliminate the time wasters. When being mindful appears daunting, remember that one minute of mindfulness makes up for many minutes of mindlessness....

Asimilar mind-body connection was described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow*. He defines a flow experience as the pleasant state of concentration or total absorption in a task. Those he interviewed—painters, dancers, and athletes—said that when they were in the midst of their art or hobby, their state of focused energy was like "floating" or "being carried by the flow." When you experience flow often, the quality of your life improves. The opposite of flow is mindlessness. During mindless listening, your barriers create resistance to the message; your mind is scattered....

In my listening classes, we begin to practice mindfulness in gentler doses. We begin by experiencing orange juice as I narrate. Students watch the rush of the deep orange color as the juice is poured into their cups. Together, we smell the citrus perfume and notice how our mouths begin to water. We sip and savor the tartness. We consider the work that went into producing this cup of juice and imagine the beauty of the tree from which it came. We think about the people who made it possible to get the juice to our table. This full experience endures until the last sip. As they listen and ponder the juice, it's always interesting to note that no one looks around the room; each one's gaze and mental focus are centered on the juice.

The point of the exercise is to take a simple human act, something that we typically take for granted, and make it come alive. So often we sleep through life, attributing little or no meaning to our daily activities. Imagine if you lent that same zest to sipping your coffee, conducting a meeting, or clearing out the refrigerator; how much more satisfied would you feel at the end of the day? I can be sure my students will never again drink orange juice the old way. And if they need a mindfulness refresher, they will simply pour themselves a glass of orange juice.

Mindfulness connects us with the experience of the moment, no matter what the activity. With listening, mindfulness connects us to the listener. *Mindlessness*, on the other hand, means letting the ego-dominated self—concerns with status, past experiences, and other barriers—separate us from the listener. The mindful listener lacks this obsessive self-consciousness that interferes with the ability to concentrate. We feel happier and more positive when we are not focusing on the self....

Students ask, "Do I have to be mindful all the time? Isn't that exhausting? Doesn't it take too much time?" Ideally, to make mindfulness a habit, we should perform as many acts as possible carefully and with thought. Begin by noticing how often you act mindlessly—driving through a stoplight, leaving the house without your keys, taking down the wrong phone number. That kind of wasted energy is exhausting and time consuming. Mindfulness saves time because you think as you act. Slowing down and carrying out the task with mindfulness significantly reduces the chances of error and mishap....

Recently, a coworker who was about to leave for her vacation told me three vital points to include on an upcoming financial report. Feeling cocky (after all I was writing a book on listening!), I did not take that mindful twenty seconds to repeat what she had said or write it down. Two days later when writing the report, I was able to recall only about 90 percent of the information. To get that forgotten

Instead of insulting yourself when mindlessness strikes, consider it a wake-up call to become mindful. Make it a point to commend yourself for the moments of mindfulness that make up your day.

Initially, it may seem like you are taking more time to carry out your tasks. You are used to doing everything in haste, so even a minute more will seem like days. Yet as your ability to concentrate improves, you will become more efficient. Tasks done mindfully are done right the first time. There is no need to recheck or redo. Mindfulness saves time.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, define *mindfulness*.
2. List four specific things that you will be doing when you listen to someone mindfully. For example, describe your posture, eye behavior, and facial expression; the connection between your conversation partner's word choices and yours; and so on.
3. The average speaking rate is 125 words per minute, and we can process up to 500 words per minute. How does Shafir suggest that you use the "spare time" that is created by this difference?
4. Does Shafir believe that you should work to be mindful all the time? Explain.

PROBES

1. Do video games encourage mindfulness or mindlessness? Explain.
2. Shafir argues that "you lull yourself into a false sense of competency" when you believe that you can multitask successfully. Explain what she believes is the practical danger of multitasking. Why does she call it a "false sense of competency"?
3. Athletes and artists sometimes talk about being "in the zone" or "in the flow." What is the relationship between this experience and mindfulness?

Empathic and Dialogic Listening

John Stewart, Karen E. Zediker, and Saskia Witteborn

This reading offers a fairly extended treatment of two kinds of helpful listening. Empathic listening enables you to understand the *other* person, thoroughly and fully. Dialogic listening takes the process one step farther: Rather than focusing mainly on what the other person

"Empathic Listening" from *Together: Communicating Interpersonally: A Social Construction Approach*, 6th Edition by John Stewart et al. Copyright © 2005 by Pearson Education, Inc.

is thinking and feeling, dialogic listening helps the two of you—or all the people in the conversation—build meaning together. So when dialogic listening works well, everybody understands each other *and* the people involved co-create new understandings that go beyond the individuals.

Karen, Saskia, and I break emphatic listening down into three main skill sets: focusing, encouraging, and reflecting. The focusing section develops what Rebecca Shafir wrote about mindfulness. We outline four specific ways to focus on the person you're listening to.

Encouraging skills are communication moves that "pull" more talk from the other person. They are designed to help your conversation partner(s) get more of what they're thinking and feeling on the table between you. Some encouraging skills are nonverbal, and some are verbal. We offer five ways to encourage people, and we also suggest two kinds of questions that are good to avoid.

Reflecting skills enable your conversation partner(s) to understand what you have heard and understood. This enables them to clarify their meanings, where necessary, and to correct any misunderstandings. The main reflecting skill is paraphrasing.

As we note, there are no "six easy steps" or "five sure-fire techniques" for dialogic listening. It takes a different level of understanding and practice. If you have trouble with this section of the reading, you might look over the materials in Chapter 12, "Promoting Dialogue." They reinforce what's discussed here and give some additional examples.

The primary ingredient for dialogic listening is your *willingness and ability to collaboratively co-construct meaning with your conversation partner(s)*. You can't listen dialogically until you move beyond your desire to "make sure she understands you" and "get your point across." Dialogic listening begins with the understanding that "the point" needs to be what's shared among those in the conversation, not just your ideas.

The primary metaphor for dialogic listening is "sculpting mutual meanings." We refer to the situation of two people seated on either side of a potter's wheel, with their four wet hands shaping the clay on the wheel. Taken figuratively, this is what it means to "sculpt mutual meaning."

We describe four specific communication moves that can help you listen dialogically: focus on "ours," paraphrase-plus, ask for a paraphrase, and run with the metaphor. We also offer an extended example conversation that illustrates these communication moves. Our goal, here and in Chapter 12, is to encourage you and empower you to work toward creating dialogic moments in more of your communicating.

MAIN IDEAS

- Empathic listening focuses on the *other* person's thoughts and feelings.
- Empathic listening requires three skill sets: focusing, encouraging, and reflecting.
- Focusing means being mindful (see the previous reading) by aiming your posture, making appropriate eye contact, moving responsively, and making responsive

- Encouraging "pulls" talk from the other with "Say more," or "For example?" mirroring, asking clarifying and open questions, and using attentive silence.
- It helps to avoid pseudoquestions and "Why?" questions.
- Reflecting checks perceptions by paraphrasing, adding an example, and gently pursuing verbal and nonverbal inconsistencies.
- Dialogic listening focuses on meanings that are *constructed between speaker and listener(s)*.
- Metaphorically, dialogic listening consists of sculpting mutual meanings.
- One skill is focusing on "ours."
- A second is to use a paraphrase-plus.
- A third is to run with the other person's metaphor(s).
- There are no guaranteed steps to achieve dialogue; it is a mutual accomplishment.

EMPATHIC LISTENING

When a person is listening empathically, he or she is receptive or sensitive to the full range of characteristics shared by the other person, but responds only with his or her own impersonal characteristics. Carl Rogers, a famous counselor who pioneered the technique of empathic listening, describes it as "entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it." He continued:

It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person. . . . To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself. (Rogers, 1980, 142-143)

This kind of listening is important, for example, when you are aware that your friend needs to vent and you are willing to listen without adding anything beyond your friend's point of view. In fact, if you respond in these situations by saying, "Well, if I were you . . ." your friend may insist, "I don't need your advice. I want you to just *listen* to me." It can also be important to listen empathically if you've been asked to mediate a dispute. You can't function very well as a mediator until you fully understand each person's point of view, and empathic listening can help you build this understanding.

Empathic listening is also an important skill for parents, teachers, and managers. Family communication research indicates, for example, that toddlers, children, and adolescents often feel that their parents listen only from their own point of view, rather than taking the time and effort to fully understand the young person's thinking and feeling.

In order to listen empathically, it's important to develop three sets of competencies: focusing, encouraging, and reflecting skills. As with any complex process, it works best to select from among the various ways to focus, encourage, and reflect. Think of the specific skills like a salad bar—put on your plate the ones that you're comfortable with and that fit the situation you're in.

Focusing Skills

As with analytic listening, the first step is to orient your attention to the person you're listening to. This begins with an internal decision about how you are going to invest your time and energy. Here it helps to recall the distinction between *spending* time and *investing* it and to realize that empathic listening can often pay the dividends of any good investment. Then you remember that listening takes effort, and you put aside the other things you're doing to concentrate on the other person. At this point, focusing surfaces in four skills.

The first is *aiming your posture*. Turn your body so that you're facing or nearly facing the person you're listening to, and if you're seated, lean toward your conversation partner. This is a simple thing to do, and yet a variety of studies have underscored its importance. It's been demonstrated that when listeners focus their bodies this way, the people they're talking with perceive them as more "warm" and accessible and consequently they find it's easier to volunteer more information (Stiff et al., 1988).

A second part of focusing is making *natural and appropriate eye contact*. In Western cultures, when you look the other person in the eye, you are not only acutely aware of him or her, but you are also directly available to that person. Studies of nonverbal listening behavior in these cultures typically identify eye contact and forward body lean or movement toward the other as two of the most important indicators of attraction and contact (Halone & Pechioni, 2001). So, if you cannot easily make eye contact with the other person, move to a position where you can. If you're talking with children, get down on the same level by kneeling or sitting, so that they can see you looking at them.

As we've already noted, the amount and kind of eye contact that are "appropriate" depend partly on the cultural identities of the people involved. If you're talking with a person from a culture that proscribes eye contact except between intimates or from a superior to an inferior, it's important to try to honor these guidelines. If you're from one of these cultures, and your conversation partner is not, it can help to alter your own behavior in the direction of the other person's expectations as far as you comfortably can. But so long as you are operating in a generally Western communication context, it's important to work toward making eye contact 50 percent to 70 percent of the time.

The third and fourth ways to focus are to *move responsively* and to *make responsive sounds*. We've known people who believed they were listening intently when they sat staring at the other person, completely immobile, and with unchanging, deadpan expressions on their faces. There are two problems with this habit. The most obvious one is that, even though you may think you're listening well, it doesn't look like you are. Unless I see some response in your body and on your face, I'm not convinced that you're really being affected by what I'm saying. The second problem is more subtle: Actually you are not fully involved in what you're hearing until your body begins to register your involvement. So even though you might think you're focused when you're immobile and silent, you are not as focused as you will be when you start

moving responsively and making responsive sounds. Since everybody's mind and body are intimately connected, the kinesthetic sensations of your body's responsiveness will actually help your mind stay focused.

By moving responsively, we mean smiling, nodding or shaking your head, moving your eyebrows, shrugging your shoulders, frowning, and so on. These actions should be prompted by, in response to, and linked up with what the other person says and does. So an effective listener isn't nodding or smiling all the time; she nods or smiles when that is responsive to what the other person is saying, and she frowns or shakes her head when that's responsive.

Responsive sounds include the "Mnnhuh," "Oh?" "Yeah..." "Ahh?" "Sure!" "Really?" [and] "Awww" utterances that audibly tell the other person you're tuned in to what he or she is saying. If you doubt the importance of responsive sounds, try being completely silent the next time you're listening over the phone. After a very short time the other person will ask something like "Are you still there?" We need sounds like these to reassure us that our hearer is actually listening.

These four skills may seem overly obvious or simplistic, but it is quite clear from a number of communication studies that people differ greatly in their ability to apply these behaviors.

Encouraging Skills

The second set of empathic listening skills is designed to "pull" more talk from the other person. More talk is obviously not always a good thing. But when you want to understand as completely as possible where another person is coming from, you need to have enough verbal and nonverbal talk to make the picture clear. As a result, we want to make six specific suggestions about how to encourage.

The first is the most direct one: As a listener, respond when appropriate with "Say more," "Keep talking," "Could you elaborate on that?" or "For example?" One situation where this response can help is when someone makes a comment that sounds fuzzy or incomplete. Frequently the listener's inclination is to try to paraphrase what's been said or to act on the information even though it's uncertain whether he or she has the materials to do so. Of course, it would be pretty ridiculous to respond to "I wonder what time it is" with "Could you say more about that?" But each time you hear a new idea, a new topic, or an important point being made, we suggest you begin your empathic listening effort at that moment not by guessing what the other person means but by asking her or him to tell you. "Say more," "Keep talking," or some similar encouragement can help.

A second encouraging skill is called *mirroring*. Mirroring means repeating a key word or phrase of the other person's with a question on your face and in your voice. "Repeating?" Yes, you must repeat the words, but you must

and feed it back with a questioning inflection and raised eyebrows, and the other person will elaborate on what he has just said. "Elaborate?" Yeah—you know, he will give an example, or restate what he said in other terms, or make some such effort to clarify the point he is making. Just as we have been doing here.

A third encouraging response is the *clarifying question*. Often this takes the form "Do you mean ... ?" or "When you say _____, do you mean _____?" You might ask the person to explain how he or she is defining a word or phrase, or you might ask for the implications of what is being said. In a job interview, for example, the interviewer might comment, "Our company is interested only in assertive people ..." and the candidate could ask, "When you say 'assertive,' what do you mean?" Tone of voice is an important part of clarifying questions. Remember, your questions are motivated by a need to understand more clearly; they are not meant to force the other person into a corner with a demand to "define your terms!"

Open questions are a fourth way to encourage. *Closed questions* call for a yes or no, single-word, or simple-sentence answer. *Open questions* just identify a topic-area and encourage the other person to talk about it. So, "Who was that person I saw you with last night?" is a closed question, and "How's your love life going?" is a more open one. Open questions often begin with "What do you think about ... ?" or "How do you feel about ... ?" while a closed version of a similar question might begin "Do you think ... ?" Both types of questions can be useful, but when you want to encourage, use open ones.

A fifth way to encourage is by using *attentive silence*. As we've said before, the point of empathic listening is to develop and understand the perspective of the speaker. So, stay focused and give the other person plenty of room to talk. This is frequently all a person needs to be encouraged to contribute more.

Our two final suggestions about encouraging highlight what *not* to do. Encouraging obviously involves asking questions, but not just any question. There are two types of questions that it helps to avoid. The first are what we call *pseudoquestions*. *Pseudo* means pretended, unreal, or fake, and a *pseudoquestion* is a judgment or opinion pretending to be a question. "Where do you think you're going?" is not really a question, it's a pseudoquestion. In other words, if you think about how this question functions in actual conversation, you can hear how it's almost always a complaint or a judgment one person is making about the other. "Where do you think you're going?" usually says something like "Get back here!" or "I don't want you to leave." "Is it safe to drive this fast?" is another pseudoquestion; here, the hidden statement is something like "I'm scared by your driving," or "I wish you'd slow down." At times, we may use pseudoquestions to soften a more directly negative evaluation of the other person (Goodman & Esterly, 1990, 760). But often such softening attempts are confusing and add more frustration than they're worth. Our point here is that if you use them in your efforts to encourage, they can backfire. Instead of pseudoquestions, try to ask only real ones, genu-

A second kind of question to avoid is the one that begins with the word "Why," because these questions tend to promote defensiveness. When people hear "Why?" questions, they often believe the questioner is asking them for a rationale or an excuse. "Why did you decide to bring him to this meeting?" "Why are you turning that in now?" "Why didn't you call me?" "Why did you decide to do it that way?" Do you hear the implicit demand in these questions? The problem is that "Why?" questions often put the questioned person on the spot. They seem to call for a moral or value justification. As a result, they don't work as encouragers. In their place, try asking exactly the same question but begin it with different words. For example, try "How did you decide to ... ?" or "What are your reasons for ... ?" We believe that you will find it works better.

Reflecting Skills

This third set of skills will help you directly reflect the other person's perspective in the communication process. This is the central goal of empathic listening. There are three skills in this final set. The first is called *paraphrasing*. A paraphrase is a restatement of the other's meaning in your own words, followed by a verification check. This means there are four important parts to a paraphrase: (1) It's a restatement, not a question. A paraphrase doesn't start out by asking; it starts out by telling the other what you have heard. The first words of a paraphrase might be "So you believe that ..." or "In other words, you're saying that ..." (2) It's a restatement of the other's meaning, not a repeat of the other's words. Meanings include both ideas and feelings, and the fullest paraphrase captures some of both. "So you're worried that ..." or "It sounds like you are really upset because you believe that ..." are two examples of restating feelings—"worry" and "upset." (3) A paraphrase has to be in your own words. ... Translating the other's meaning into your words demonstrates that you've thought about it, that it's gone through your brain cells. (4) After the restatement, you finish a paraphrase with an opportunity for the other person to verify your understanding. You can do this very simply—just by pausing and raising your eyebrows, or asking "Right?" or "Is that it?" Paraphrasing is such a powerful communication move that, if you follow these four steps periodically in your conversations, your empathic listening effectiveness will improve significantly.

The second reflective skill is *adding an example*. You can contribute to the listening process by giving an example from your own experience that you believe illustrates his or her point. Remember that this is an effort to listen empathically, not to turn the conversation away from the other person's concerns and toward yours.

Remember that understanding is very different from agreement, and that neither the paraphrase nor adding an example requires you to agree with the other person. These listening responses are designed to

the empathic listening process, to simply help you understand the other person's perspective.

The third and final reflecting skill also takes some finesse. The skill consists of *gently pursuing verbal and nonverbal inconsistencies*. The first step is to identify when you think they've occurred. You have to be sensitive enough to recognize when the words a person is speaking don't match the way she or he is saying them. A shouted, scowling "I'm not mad!" is an obvious example of an inconsistency between verbal and nonverbal cues. Most of the time, though, it's much more subtle. John had a friend who declared she was not going to waste any more time being angry at her boss, and then spent the next half hour complaining about the boss's most recent actions. In other situations, facial expression and tone of voice accompanying a person's "Sure," "I don't care," "Go ahead with it," or "It doesn't make any difference to me" can reveal that the words are thin masks for disappointment, concern, or hurt feelings.

As a listener you can help move beyond surface-level meanings by gently pursuing the verbal/nonverbal inconsistencies you notice. We stress the word *gently*. When you notice an inconsistency, remember that it's your interpretation of what's going on; be willing to own it as your own. Remember, too, that if the other person also sees an inconsistency, there's a reason for its being there. He or she may not be ready or willing to admit the difference between cues at one level and cues at another. So don't use this skill as a license to clobber someone with a club made out of sidewalk psychoanalysis. Instead, just describe the inconsistency you think is there and open the door for the other person to talk about it.

For example, one group of professionals John worked with were experiencing some conflict over a proposal made by their new manager. The manager decided that the group needed to be more cohesive, so she proposed that each Friday afternoon the office close down an hour early so the workers could spend some time together informally chatting over wine and cheese. Most of the people welcomed the idea, but two resisted it. They didn't like what they saw as "forced socializing," and they resented the fact that only alcoholic drinks were being served. They didn't think it was appropriate to "drink on the job." John asked the group to discuss this issue as part of their listening training. Ann, the manager, turned to Gene, one of the two persons resisting the plan, and asked what he thought about these Friday afternoon get-togethers. Gene turned slightly away in his chair, folded his arms in front of him, looked down at the floor, and said, "Well ... it's a pretty ... good idea ..." Ann smiled and softly said, "Gene, your words tell me one thing and your body says something else." Then she was silent. After a couple of seconds, Gene relaxed his body posture, smiled, and admitted that he actually didn't like the plan very much. This began a conversation that ended up redesigning the get-togethers to respond to Gene's concerns.

The primary reason this listening response works is that nonverbal cues can "leak" implicit or hidden messages. Thus, a person's tone of voice, posture, eye behavior, and even facial expression often reveal levels of meaning that are obscured by his or her choice of words. Sensitive listeners try to respond to such

DIALOGIC LISTENING

There is no simple recipe for dialogic listening—no “six easy steps” or “five surefire techniques.” This is something that anybody who wants to can definitely do, but it requires an overall approach to communicating that’s different from the stance most people ordinarily take when they listen or talk. You also need to maintain a sometimes-difficult tension or balance . . . between holding your own ground and being open to the person(s) you’re communicating with. The best way to get a sense of this approach and this tension is to understand a little bit about the idea of *dialogue*.

Dia-logos as Meaning-Through

The term *dialogue* is made up of two Greek words, *dia* and *logos*. The *logos* in *dia-logos* is the Greek word for *meaning* or *understanding*. (The Greek term *logos* has other meanings, too. Sometimes it is translated as “logic,” and at other times it comes into English as “language.” But its most fundamental meaning is “meaning.”) The *dia* in *dia-logos* means not “two” but “through” (Bohm, 1990). So dialogue is not restricted to two-person communicating, and it is an event where meaning emerges *through* all the participants. This is another way of saying that, in dialogue, meaning or understanding is *collaboratively constructed*. The important implication of this idea for each participant is that, when you’re listening and talking dialogically, *you are not in control of what comes out of the communicating*. This point is stated clearly by Abraham Kaplan:

When people are in [dialogue] . . . the content of what is being communicated does not exist prior to and independently of that particular context. There is no message, except in a post-hoc reconstruction, which is fixed and complete beforehand. If I am really talking with you, I have nothing to say; what I say arises as you and I genuinely relate to one another. I do not know beforehand who I will be, because I am open to you just as you are open to me. (quoted in Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994)

As communication teacher Bruce Hyde points out, the main obstacle to dialogic listening is the kind of self or identity that replaces this openness to collaboration with the conviction that the ideas I utter are tightly connected with who I am. There’s a big difference, Bruce notes, “between being right about something and being committed to something. Being right makes somebody else wrong; being committed has room to engage productively with other points of view.” In other words, if you’re committed, you might even welcome the chance to talk with someone who believes differently from the way you believe, but if you’re committed to being right, there’s not much room for people who don’t share your position to be anything but wrong. The key difference has to do with identity. The person who’s caught up in being right identifies him- or herself first as an advocate for a certain position. The person who’s committed, on the other hand, identifies him- or herself first as a listener who’s collaborating on

but not in control of, what comes out of the conversation. If you’re going to listen dialogically, you have to be more interested in building-meaning-through than in being right. And this, Bruce writes, “in my experience is the hardest single thing you can ask of anyone.” The first step toward dialogic listening is to recognize that each communication event is a ride on a tandem bicycle, and *you* may or may not be in the front seat.

Sculpting Mutual Meanings

To shift from the bicycle metaphor, we’ve found that it helps to think and talk about the nuts and bolts of dialogic listening with the help of the image of a potter’s wheel (Stewart & Thomas, 1990). The sculpting mutual meanings metaphor was created by communication teacher Milt Thomas, and he uses it to suggest a concrete, graphic image of what it means to listen dialogically.

Picture yourself sitting on one side of a potter’s wheel with your conversation partner across from you. As you participate (talk) together, each of you adds clay to the form on the wheel, and each uses wet fingers, thumbs, and palms to shape the finished product. Like clay, verbal and nonverbal talk is tangible and malleable; they’re out there between people to hear, to record, and to shape. If I am unclear or uncertain about what I am thinking about or what I want to say, I can put something out there and you can modify its shape, ask me to add more clay, or add some of your own. Your specific shaping, which you could only have done in response to the shape I formed, may move in a direction that I would never have envisioned. The clay you add may be an idea I’ve thought about before—although not here or in this form—or it may be completely new to me. Sometimes these “co-sculpting” sessions will be mostly playful, with general notions tossed on the wheel and the result looking like a vaguely shaped mass. At other times, the basic shape is well defined and conversation partners spend their time on detail and refinement. Peoples’ efforts, though, always produce some kind of result, and frequently it can be very gratifying. Sometimes I feel that our talk helps me understand myself better than I could have alone. At other times, we produce something that transcends anything either of us could have conceived of separately. This is because the figure we sculpt is not mine or yours but *ours*, the outcome of both of our active shapings.

So in order to enter into the sculpting process effectively, you need to remember, as we have said many times before, that the meanings that count between people are not just the ones inside somebody’s head but also the ones that are constructed in conversations. With this understanding you will be willing to sit down at the potter’s wheel, throw your clay on the wheel, and encourage the other person to add clay, too. Then you need to be willing to get your hands dirty, to participate in the collaborative process of molding meanings together.

As you might have guessed, in order to put this basic attitude into action,

Focus on "Ours" We mentioned before that dialogic listening involves a crucial change from a focus on *me* or the *other* to a focus on *ours*, on what's between speaker(s) and listener(s). Contrast this with empathic listening, which requires you to try to experience what is "behind" another's outward communication. When you focus on *ours*, you don't look behind the verbal and nonverbal cues. You don't try to deduce or guess what internal state the other is experiencing. Instead, you concentrate on the meanings you and the other person are mutually creating between yourselves. Empathic listening can be helpful, as we said, but dialogic listening requires a move beyond empathy to a focus on *ours*.

It can make a big difference whether you are trying to identify what's going on inside the other person or whether you're focusing on building meaning between. When your focus is on the other's thoughts and feelings "behind" their words, you spend your time and mental energy searching for possible links between what you're seeing and hearing and what the other "must be" meaning. "Look at those crossed arms. She must be feeling angry and defensive." When you think this way, your attention is moving back and forth between what's outside, in the verbal and nonverbal talk, and what's inside the person's head. From this position, it's easy to believe that what's inside is more reliable, more important, more true, and hence more interesting than the talk on the surface.

But when you're focusing on *ours*, you concentrate on what's outside, not what's supposedly inside. We don't mean that you should be insensitive to the other person's feelings. In fact, you will be even more sensitive when you are focused on what's between you here and now. You concentrate on the verbal and nonverbal talk that the two (or more) of you are building together. In a sense, you take the conversation at face value; you never stop attending to it instead of focusing mainly on something you infer is behind it. This doesn't mean you uncritically accept everything that's said as "the whole truth and nothing but the truth." But you do realize that meaning is not just what's inside one person's head. Focusing on *ours* prepares you to respond and inquire in ways that make it clear that "getting to the meaning" is a mutual process.

Encouraging as Nexting Dialogic listening also requires a special form of encouraging. Basically, instead of encouraging the other person(s) to "say more," you're encouraging him or her to respond to something you've just put on the potter's wheel in response to something he or she has just said. So your encouraging is a "nexting" move; it actively and relevantly keeps the collaborative construction process going.

One specific way to do this is with a *paraphrase-plus*. We've already said that a paraphrase consists of (1) a restatement, (2) of the other's meaning, (3) in your own verbal and nonverbal talk, (4) concluded with an opportunity for the other person to verify your understanding. The *paraphrase-plus* includes all of these elements *plus* a small but important addition.

The plus is your own response to the question "What's next?" or "Now what?" You start by remembering that the meaning you are building is

created between the two of you, and individual perspectives are only a part of that. If you stopped with just the paraphrase, you would be focusing on the *other* person exclusively instead of keeping the focus on what is happening *between* you. So, you follow your verifying or perception-checking paraphrase with whatever your good judgment tells you is your response to what the person said, and you conclude your *paraphrase-plus* with an invitation for the person to respond to your synthesis of his or her meaning and yours. The spirit of the *paraphrase-plus* is that each individual perspective is a building block for the team effort. For example, notice the three possible responses to Rita's comments.

RITA: I like having an "exclusive" relationship, and I want you to be committed to me. But I still sometimes want to go out with other people.

1. **MUNEO:** So even though part of you agrees with me about our plan not to date others, you're still a little uncertain about it. Right? (Paraphrase)
2. **TIM:** Oh, so you want me to hang around like an idiot while you go out and play social butterfly! Talk about a double standard! (Attack)
3. **SCORR:** It sounds like you think there are some pluses and minuses in the kind of relationship we have now. I like it the way it is, but I don't like knowing that you aren't sure. I guess I want you to tell me some more about why you're questioning it. (Paraphrase-plus)

Muneco responds to Rita's comment with a paraphrase. This tells us that Muneco listened to Rita, but not much more. Tim makes a caricature of Rita's comment; his interpretation reflects his own uncertainty, anger, and fear. His comment is more a condemnation than a paraphrase. Scott offers a *paraphrase-plus*. He explains his interpretation of what Rita was saying, then he says briefly how he *responds* to her point, and then he moves the focus back between the two of them, to the middle, where both persons are present in the conversation and can work on the problem together. He does this by putting some of his own clay onto the potter's wheel. He paraphrases, but he also addresses the "What's next?" question as he interprets and responds to her comments. Then he concludes the *paraphrase-plus* with encouraging rather than simply verifying the accuracy of his paraphrase. When all this happens, both the paraphrase and the plus keep understanding growing between the individuals.

Another way to think about the *paraphrase-plus* is that you're broadening your goal beyond listening for "fidelity" or "correspondence." If you're paraphrasing for fidelity or correspondence, you're satisfied and "finished" with the task as soon as you've successfully reproduced "what she means." Your paraphrase is a success if it corresponds accurately to the other person's intent. We're suggesting that you go beyond correspondence to creativity, beyond reproducing to producing, to mutually constructing meanings or understandings between you.

Another skill you can use in the sculpting process is to *run with the metaphor*. You can build meaning into the conversation by extending whatever metaphors the other person has used to express her or his ideas, developing your own

know, metaphors are figures of speech that link two dissimilar objects or ideas in order to make a point. Besides "Communication is made up of inhaling and exhaling," "Conversation is a ride on a tandem bicycle," and "Dialogic listening is sculpting mutual meanings," "This place is a zoo," and "My vacation was a circus," all contain metaphors. As these examples illustrate, metaphors don't appear only in poetry or other literature; they are a major part of most everyday conversation. In our label for this skill, "run with the metaphor," for example, the term *run* itself is metaphoric.

This skill consists of listening for both subtle and obvious metaphors and then weaving them into your responses. We have found that when other people hear their metaphor coming back to them, they can get a very quick and clear sense of how they're being heard, and they typically can develop the thought along the lines sketched by the metaphor. For example, in a workshop he was leading, John was listening to an engineer describe part of his job, which involved going before regulatory boards and municipal committees to answer questions and make arguments for various construction projects. Part of what Phil said about his job was that it was a "game." John tried to run with the metaphor by asking, "What's the name of the game?" "Winning," Phil responded. John recognized that his question had been ambiguous, so he continued: "Okay, but what kind of game is it—is it baseball, football, soccer, chess, or what?" "It's football," Phil replied. "What position do you play?" "Fullback." "And who's the offensive line?" "All the people in the office who give me the information I take to the meetings." "Who's the coach?" "We don't have one. That's the major problem." This was a telling response. In fact, from that point on, the workshop was focused on one of the major management problems that engineering firm was having. Here's another example of how running with the metaphor can work in conversation:

TANYA: You look a lot less happy than when I saw you this morning. What's happening?

ANN: I just got out of my second two-hour class today, and I can't believe how much I have to do. I'm really feeling squashed.

TANYA: *Squashed* like you can't come up for air, or *squashed* as in you have to do what everybody else wants and you can't pursue your own ideas?

ANN: More like I can't come up for air. Every professor seems to think his or her class is the only one I'm taking.

Again, the purpose of running with the metaphor is to build the conversation between the two of you in order to produce as full as possible a response to the issues you're talking about. In addition, the metaphors themselves reframe or give a new perspective on the topic of your conversation. A project manager who sees her- or himself as a "fullback" is going to think and behave differently from one who thinks in other metaphorical terms, like "general," "Joan of Arc," "guide," or "mother hen." And the work stress that "squashes" you is different from the pressure that "keeps you jumping like a flea on a griddle." Listen for metaphors and take advantage of their power to change and extend ideas.

Remember our point that all these specific listening skills are like dishes in a salad bar: You don't eat everything, and at different times you select different dishes. Let's look at an extended example of a conversation that illustrates some of the listening attitudes and skills we've discussed. Sally and Julio start out at opposite sides in their opinions about the class. But first Julio, and then both he and Sally dialogically listen to each other. As a result, their interpretations of the class and the teacher change; they build a meaning that neither of them had at the beginning of the conversation. At the left margins, we've labeled some of the specific empathic and dialogic listening skills they're using.

SALLY: That class drives me up a wall.

JULIO: I thought it was going pretty well. What happened?

SALLY: She's so strict! We can't miss more than five hours of class, everything has to be submitted electronically, she won't take late papers. I'll bet she wouldn't even allow a makeup exam if I was in the hospital!

JULIO: I didn't know she wouldn't take late papers. Where did you hear that?

SALLY: Alaysha told me that on Tuesday she tried to hand in the article analysis that was due Monday and Dr. Clinton wouldn't accept it.

JULIO: Was there anything else going on? Hilary and I both turned in our journals late and she took them. I also thought the five-hour restriction and the e-mail requirement were pretty standard at this school.

SALLY: Do you have them in other classes?

JULIO: Yeah. My geology prof allows only two days' absence and won't accept hardly any excuses.

SALLY: Are your other profs so stiff and formal in class?

JULIO: Some are and some aren't. Clinton is a lot looser in her office. Have you ever talked to her there?

SALLY: No, I don't like the way she treated Alaysha.

JULIO: So Alaysha did the assignment like she was supposed to and Clinton wouldn't take it even though it was only one day late?

SALLY: Well, it wasn't e-mailed, but I still think it's pretty unreasonable. I haven't started the paper that's due this Friday, and I'll bet there's no way she'd accept it Monday.

JULIO: I know how that feels. But if you've got a good reason. I'll bet she would. She told me last term

(open

question)

(say more)

(clarifying

question)

(say more)

(say more)

(paraphrase)

(paraphrase-
style)

that most of her rules come from what other profs tell her are the standards here. This school is really into developing responsibility and treating everybody like an adult. That's why I thought they required attendance and e-mailed papers. But I think Clinton is willing to listen, and she's bent the rules for me a couple of times. You've been doing fine in class, and I'd really be surprised if she turned you down.

SALLY: I didn't know that about this school; this is my first term here.

JULIO: Well, I didn't know about Alaysha, but she probably should have printed it out.

SALLY: Yeah. Well, thanks for listening—and for the information.

Remember that we do not mean to present these skills as a guaranteed step-by-step way to instant success. They are suggestions, guidelines, examples of ways you can behaviorally work the focusing, encouraging, and sculpting processes of dialogic listening. They won't work if you apply them woodenly or mechanically; you have to use them with sensitivity to the relationship and the situation.

As you begin using these skills—and this also applies to all the skills we have discussed—you may feel awkward and even phony. This is natural. It is part of learning any new skill, whether it's skiing, tennis, aerobics, or listening. Remember that the better you get with practice, the less awkward you will feel. Try not to let any initial feelings of discomfort distract you from working on specific ways to improve.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the basic similarities and differences between empathic and dialogic listening.
2. Focusing skills take time. How can the distinction between "spending" and "investing" time encourage you to take the time to focus?
3. What is it important *not* to do with your eye contact, movement, and sound if you want to focus effectively?
4. What's the difference between a clarifying question and an open question?
5. What's a "pseudoquestion"? Why is it dangerous?
6. What are the four parts of a paraphrase?
7. *Dia-logos* means "meaning-through." Explain.
8. Distinguish ethnocentric from cosmopolitan communicating.
9. How is "focus on ours" different from the "focusing" that is part of empathic listening?

PROBES

1. How can people cope with the natural tendency to feel that practicing new communication skills will make their communicating sound phony and artificial?
2. What are some real-world exceptions to the authors' advice about "Why?" questions?
3. What danger accompanies the "adding an example" skill?
4. How can you "gently pursue verbal/nonverbal inconsistencies" without playing "Gotcha!"?
5. Google the word "dialogue," and identify examples of what we discuss about its importance in business and public communication.
6. Give an example from your own experience where you or your conversation partner "ran with a metaphor."

REFERENCES

- Anderson, R., Cissna, K. N., & Arnett, R. C. (Eds.). (1994). *The reach of dialogue: Confirmation, voice, and community*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Bohm, D. (1990). *On dialogue*. Ojai, CA: David Bohm Seminars.
- Halone, K. K., & Pechioni, L. L. (2001). Relational listening: A grounded theoretical model. *Communication Reports*, 14, 59–71.
- Rogers, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Goodman, G., & Esterly, G. (1990). Questions: The most popular piece of language. In J. Stewart (Ed.), *Bridges not walls*, 5th ed. (p. 760). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stewart, J., & Thomas, M. (1990). "Dialogic listening: Sculpting mutual meanings." In J. Stewart (Ed.), *Bridges not walls*, 6th ed. (pp. 184–202). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stiff, J. B., Dillard, J. P., Somera, L., Kim, H., & Sleight, C. (1988). Empathy, communication, and prosocial behavior. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 198–213.

Being Open with and to Other People

David W. Johnson

The first half of "making meaning together" (the title of Part Two of *B* "inhalation," and the second half of this process involves what I'm calling "exhaling." As the metaphor indicates, this is the "output" or "sending" part of communication. The readings in this chapter explain interpersonal openness and self-expression.

This first reading is from a book called *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization*, by David Johnson, a teacher at the University of Minnesota. He begins with the notion that all of our relationships can be classified on a continuum from open to closed. Of course, an "open" work or school relationship is different from an "open" family or intimate relationship, but in all cases, Johnson claims, openness means both being open with other people (disclosing yourself to them) and openness to others (listening to them in an accepting way). Relationships of all sorts develop as both kinds of openness increase.

With a considerable amount of social scientific research in the background, Johnson defines self-disclosure and identifies four of its important characteristics. He notes that effective disclosure focuses on the present rather than the past, includes feelings as well as facts, has both breadth and depth, and, especially in the early stages of a relationship, needs to be reciprocal. Then Johnson outlines the impact self-disclosure has on relationships and describes some of its benefits. He argues that "if you cannot reveal yourself, you cannot become close to others, and you cannot be valued by others for who you are." Clearly, there are various ways to self-disclose and various kinds of information to share. But this author makes a strong connection between disclosure and effective interpersonal communicating.

One benefit of disclosure is that it can begin and deepen your relationships, whether at work, home, or school. It can also increase your self-awareness and your understanding of yourself. Self-disclosure can provide, as Johnson puts it, "a freeing experience" and can also help you control challenging social situations. Another benefit of self-disclosure is that it can help you manage stress and adversity.

Johnson also lists eight ways to keep self-disclosures appropriate. I think each of the eight is useful. As he notes, disclosures need to be part of an ongoing relationship, not "off the wall" or "out of nowhere." They need to be focused on the people present and sensitive to others' possible distress. Disclosure ought to be intended to improve the relationship and should move to deeper levels only gradually. Johnson also usefully notes that "there are times when you will want to hide your reactions," and he explains when and why.

In the final section of this reading, Johnson talks about the connection between self-disclosure and self-presentation. He discusses how all of us help manage others' impressions of who we are, in part with our self-disclosures. He compares and contrasts the motives of "strategic self-presentation," which means efforts to shape others' impression of us, and "self-verification," which is the desire to have others perceive us as we genuinely perceive ourselves. As he notes, "self-presentation and impression management are part of everyone's life," which is why Johnson believes that the more you know about self-disclosure, the more effective you can be at this part of your communicating.

CHAPTER 6

Exhaling: Expressing and Disclosing



MAIN IDEAS

- Relationships can be classified on a sliding scale from "open" to "closed," where openness means both being open *with* others by disclosing and being open to others by listening well.
- Openness *with* another requires self-disclosure, which requires some level of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and trust.
- Self-disclosure is revealing to another person how you are responding to the present situation and giving information that helps others understand your present responses.
- Healthy relationships are built on self-disclosure.
- Self-disclosure enables you and others to get to know each other.
- Self-disclosure allows you and others to identify common goals and overlapping needs, interests, activities, and values.
- Self-disclosure is necessary to collaborate to accomplish goals.
- Self-disclosure improves the quality of relationships and allows the discloser to validate her perceptions of reality.
- Self-disclosure can increase self-awareness and be liberating.
- You can always choose what to disclose and when.
- There are at least eight principles for keeping disclosures appropriate.
- Appropriate disclosures are selective and adapted to their audiences.
- Two motives for disclosure are strategic self-presentation and self-verification.

Relationships may be classified on a continuum from open to closed. *Openness* in a relationship refers to participants' willingness to share their ideas, feelings, and reactions to the current situation. On a professional basis, relationships among collaborators who are working to achieve mutual goals tend to be quite open, while relationships among competitors who are seeking advantages over each other tend to be quite closed. On a personal level, some relationships (such as friendships) are very open, while other relationships (such as casual acquaintances) are relatively closed. The more open participants in a relationship are with each other, the more positive, constructive, and effective the relationship tends to be.

Openness has two sides. To build good relationships you must be both open *with* other people (disclosing yourself to them) and open *to* others (listening to their disclosures in an accepting way). Usually, the more that people know about you, the more likely they are to like you. Yet self-disclosure does carry a degree of risk. For just as knowing you better is likely to result in a closer relationship, sometimes it could result in people liking you less. "Familiarity breeds contempt" means that some people may learn something

"Being Open with and to Other People" from *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness & Self-Actualization*, 6/e by David W. Johnson. Published by Allyn and Bacon, Boston, MA. Copyright © 1997 by Pearson Education. Reprinted by permission of Allyn and Bacon.

about you that detracts from the relationship. Because disclosing is risky, some people prefer to hide themselves from others in the belief that no reaction is better than a possible negative reaction. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," however, means that some risk is vital to achieving any worthwhile goal. To build a meaningful relationship you have to disclose yourself to the other person and take the risk that the other person may reject rather than like you.

The other side of the coin is responding to the other person's self-disclosures. Being open to another person means showing that you are interested in how he or she feels and thinks. This does not mean prying into the intimate areas of his or her life. It means being willing to listen in an accepting way to his or her reactions to the present situation and to what you are doing and saying. Even when a person's behavior offends you, you may wish to express acceptance of the person and disagreement *with* the way he or she behaves.

In order for the relationship to build and develop, both individuals have to disclose and be open to other people's disclosures. Openness depends on three factors: self-awareness, self-acceptance, and trust...

OPENNESS WITH OTHER INDIVIDUALS

You are *open with* other persons when you disclose yourself to them, sharing your ideas, feelings, and reactions to the present situation, and letting other people know who you are as a person. To be open with another person you must (a) be aware of who you are, (b) accept yourself, and (c) take the risk of trusting the other person to be accepting of you. Openness thus can be described as being dependent on self-awareness (S), self-acceptance (A), and trust (T) ($O = S A T$). Commonly, openness is known as self-disclosure.

What Is Self-Disclosure?

Self-disclosure is revealing to another person how you perceive and are reacting to the present situation and giving any information about yourself and your past that is relevant to an understanding of your perceptions and reactions to the present. Effective self-disclosure has a number of characteristics:

1. **Self-disclosure focuses on the present, not the past.** Self-disclosure does not mean revealing intimate details of your past life. Making highly personal confessions about your past may lead to a temporary feeling of intimacy, but a relationship is built by disclosing your reactions to events you both are experiencing or to what the other person says or does. A person comes to know and understand you not through knowing your past history but through knowing how you react. Past history is helpful only if it clarifies

2. **Reactions to people and events include feelings as well as facts.** To be self-disclosing often means to share with another person how you feel about events that are occurring.
3. **Self-disclosures have two dimensions—breadth and depth.** As you get to know someone better and better, you cover more topics in your explanations (breadth) and make your explanations more personally revealing (depth).
4. **In the early stages of a relationship, self-disclosure needs to be reciprocal.** The amount of self-disclosure you engage in will influence the amount of self-disclosure the other person engages in and vice versa. The polite thing to do is to match the level of self-disclosure offered by new acquaintances, disclosing more if they do so and drawing back if their self-disclosure declines. Once a relationship is well established, strict reciprocity occurs much less frequently.

Impact of Self-Disclosure on Relationships

Healthy relationships are built on self-disclosure. A relationship grows and develops as two people become more open about themselves to each other. If you cannot reveal yourself, you cannot become close to others, and you cannot be valued by others for who you are. Two people who let each other know how they are reacting to situations and to each other are pulled together; two people who stay silent about their reactions and feelings stay strangers.

There are many ways in which self-disclosure initiates, builds, and maintains relationships. *First, self-disclosure enables you and other people to get to know each other.* Most relationships proceed from superficial exchanges to more intimate ones. At first, individuals disclose relatively little to another person and receive relatively little in return. When initial interactions are enjoyable or interesting, exchanges become (a) broader, involving more areas of your life, and (b) deeper, involving more important and sensitive areas. In terms of breadth, from discussing the weather and sports, as the relationship develops you may discuss a wider range of topics (such as your family, your hopes and dreams, issues at work, and so forth) and share more diverse activities (such as going to movies or plays together, going bike riding or playing tennis together, and so forth). In terms of depth, you might willingly talk with a casual acquaintance about your preferences in food and music but reserve for close friends discussions of your anxieties and personal ambitions. The longer people interact, the more topics they tend to be willing to discuss and the more personally revealing they tend to become. This does not mean that getting to know another person is a simple process of being more and more open. You do not simply disclose more and more each day. Rather, there are cycles of seeking intimacy and avoiding it. Sometimes you are candid and confiding with a friend, and other times you are restrained and distant. The development of caring and commitment in a relationship, however, results from the cumulative history of self-disclosure in the relationship.

Second, self-disclosure allows you and other individuals to identify common goals and overlapping needs, interests, activities, and values. In order to know whether a relationship with another person is desirable, you have to know what the other person wants from the relationship, what the other person is interested in, what joint activities might be available, and what the other person values. Relationships are built on common goals, interests, activities, and values. If such information is not disclosed, the relationship may end before it has a chance to begin.

Third, once common goals have been identified, self-disclosure is necessary to work together to accomplish them. Working together requires constant self-disclosure to ensure effective communication, decision making, leadership, and resolution of conflict. Joint action to achieve mutual goals cannot be effective unless collaborators are quite open in their interactions with each other.

Just as relationships are built through self-disclosure, *relationships can deteriorate for lack of self-disclosure.* Sometimes people hide their reactions from others through fear of rejection, fear of a potential or ongoing conflict, or feelings of shame and guilt. Whatever the reason, if you hide how you are reacting to the other person, your concealment can hurt the relationship, and the energy you pour into hiding is an additional stress on the relationship. Hiding your perceptions and feelings dulls your awareness of your own inner experience and decreases your ability to disclose your reactions even when it is perfectly safe and appropriate to do so. The result can be the end of the relationship. Being silent is not being strong—strength is the willingness to take a risk by disclosing yourself with the intention of building a better relationship.

Benefits of Self-Disclosure

We disclose information to another person for many reasons. *First, you begin and deepen a relationship by sharing reactions, feelings, personal information, and confidences.* This topic has already been discussed.

Second, self-disclosure improves the quality of relationships. We disclose to those we like. We like those who disclose to us. We like those to whom we have disclosed. Overall, it is through self-disclosure that caring is developed among individuals and commitment to each other is built.

Third, self-disclosure allows you to validate your perception of reality. Listeners provide useful information about social reality. The events taking place around us and the meaning of other people's behavior are often ambiguous, open to many different interpretations. By seeing how a listener reacts to your self-disclosures, you get information about the correctness and appropriateness of your views. Other people may reassure you that your reactions are "perfectly normal" or suggest that you are "blowing things out of proportion." If others have similar interpretations, we consider our perceptions to be valid. Comparing your perceptions and reactions with the reactions and perceptions of others is called *consensual validation*. Without self-disclosure, consensual validation

Fourth, self-disclosure increases your self-awareness and clarifies your understanding of yourself. In explaining your feelings in watching a sunset or why you like a certain book, you clarify aspects of yourself to yourself. In sharing your feelings and experiences with others, you may gain greater self-understanding and self-awareness. Talking to a friend about a problem, for example, can help you clarify your thoughts about a situation. Sharing your reactions with others results in feedback from others, which contributes to a more objective perspective on your experiences.

Fifth, the expression of feelings and reactions is a freeing experience. Sometimes it helps to get emotions and reactions "off your chest." After a difficult day at work, it may release pent up feelings by telling a friend how angry you are at your boss or how unappreciated you feel. Even sharing long-term feelings of insecurity with a trusted friend may free you from such feelings. Simply being able to express your emotions is a reason for self-disclosure.

Sixth, you may disclose information about yourself or not as a means of social control. You may deliberately refrain from talking about yourself to end an interaction as quickly as possible or you may emphasize topics, beliefs, or ideas that you think will make a favorable impression on the other person.

Seventh, self-disclosure is an important part of managing stress and adversity. Communicating intimately with another person, especially in times of stress, seems to be a basic human need. By discussing your fear, you free yourself from it. By sharing your anxiety, you gain insight into ways to reduce it. By describing a problem, you see ways to solve it. The more you seek out a friend in times of adversity and discuss the situation openly, the more you will be able to deal with the stress and solve your problem.

Finally, self-disclosure fulfills a human need to be known intimately and accepted. Most people want someone to know them well and accept, appreciate, respect, and like them.

Keeping Your Self-Disclosures Appropriate

You only self-disclose when it is appropriate to do so. Just as you can disclose too little, you can also be too self-disclosing. Refusing to let anyone know anything about you keeps others away. Revealing too many of your reactions too fast may scare others away. Typically, a relationship is built gradually and develops in stages. Although you should sometimes take risks in sharing your reactions with others, you should ensure that the frequency and depth of your reactions are appropriate to the situation. When you are unsure about the appropriateness of your self-disclosures, you may wish to follow these guidelines:

1. I make sure my disclosures are not a random or isolated act but rather part of an ongoing relationship.
2. I focus my disclosures on what is going on within and between persons in the present.
3. I am sensitive to the effect a disclosure will have on the other person. Some disclosures may upset or cause considerable distress. What you want to say

may seem inappropriate to the other person. Most people become uncomfortable when the level of self-disclosure exceeds their expectations.

4. I only disclose when it has a reasonable chance of improving the relationship.
5. I continue only if my disclosures are reciprocated. When you share your reactions, you should expect disclosure in return. When it is apparent that self-disclosures will not be reciprocated, you should limit the disclosures you make.
6. I increase my disclosures when a crisis develops in the relationship.
7. I gradually move my disclosures to a deeper level. Self-disclosures may begin with the information acquaintances commonly disclose (such as talking about hobbies, sports, school, and current events) and gradually move to more personal information. As a friendship develops, the depth of disclosure increases as well. Disclosures about deep feelings and concerns are most appropriate in close, well-established relationships.
8. I keep my reactions and feelings to myself when the other person is competitive or untrustworthy. While relationships are built through self-disclosure, there are times when you will want to hide your reactions. If a person has been untrustworthy and if you know from past experience that the other person will misinterpret or overreact to your self-disclosure, you may wish to keep silent . . .

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND SELF-PRESENTATION

The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.

—W. H. Auden

Self-disclosure is based on self-awareness, self-acceptance, and taking the risk of revealing yourself to others. Self-disclosure takes place in an ongoing social interaction in which you choose how you wish to present yourself to others. Most people are concerned about the images they present to others. The fashion industry, the cosmetic companies, diet centers, and the search for new drugs that grow hair, remove hair, whiten teeth, freshen breath, and smooth out wrinkles, all exploit our preoccupation with physical appearance. Manners, courtesy, and etiquette are all responses to concern about the impressions our behavior makes.

In *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare wrote, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Erving Goffman put Shakespeare's thought into social science by arguing that life can be viewed as a play in which each of us acts out certain scripted lines. Our scripts are a reflection of the social face or social identity that we want to present to others. *Self-presentation* is the process by which we try to shape what others think of us and what we think of ourselves. It is part of *impression management*—the general process by which you

In presenting yourself to others, you have to recognize that there are many complex aspects of yourself. It is as if you have a number of selves that are tied to certain situations and certain groups of people with whom you interact. The self you present to your parents is usually different from the self you present to your peers. You present yourself differently to your boss, subordinates, colleagues, customers, neighbors, same-sex friends, opposite-sex friends, and strangers. When you are playing tennis, the aspect of yourself that loves physical exercise and competition may be most evident. When you attend a concert, the aspect of yourself that responds with deep emotion to classical music may be most evident. In church, your religious side may be most evident. In a singles bar, your interest in other people may be most evident. In different situations and with different people, different aspects of yourself will be relevant.

In presenting yourself to others, you have to vary your presentation to the audience. Societal norms virtually require that you present yourself in different ways to different audiences. You are expected to address someone considerably older than you differently from the way you address your peers. You are expected to address the president of the United States differently from how you address your next-door neighbor. In formal situations you are expected to act in ways different from how you would act in informal situations. Depending on the setting, the role relationship, and your previous experience with the person, you are expected to monitor your behavior and present yourself accordingly.

In presenting yourself to others, you basically have two motives: strategic self-presentation and self-verification. Strategic self-presentation consists of efforts to shape others' impressions in specific ways in order to gain influence, power, sympathy, or approval. Job interviews, personal ads, political campaign promises, and a defendant's appeal to a jury are examples. Your goal may be to be perceived as likable, competent, moral, dangerous, or even helpless, depending on the situation and the relationship. You communicate who you are and what you are like through your clothes, appearance, posture, eye contact, tone of voice, manners, and gestures. There are many people who believe that you will be perceived in quite different ways depending on your style of dress, manner, and cleanliness. Clothing, they believe, transmits messages about the wearer's personality, attitudes, social status, behavior, and group allegiances. People who wear clothes associated with high status tend to have more influence than those wearing low-status clothes. Somber hues (grays, dark blues, or browns) of clothing seem to communicate ambition, a taste for moderate risks and long-range planning, and a preference for tasks that have clear criteria for success and failure. Attention to clothes, posture, eye contact, tone of voice, manners, and gestures may be especially important for first impressions.

Related to strategic self-presentation are ingratiation and self-promotion. Ingratiation describes acts that are motivated by the desire to get along and be liked. When people want to be liked, they put their best foot forward, smile a lot, make eye contact, nod their heads, express agreement with what is said, and give compliments and favors. Self-promotion describes acts that are motivated by the desire to be seen as competent and successful. Self-promotion involves highlighting one's achievements and skills.

by a desire to "get ahead" and be respected for one's competence. When people want to be respected for their competence, they try to impress others by talking about themselves and immodestly showing off their knowledge, status, and exploits.

The second self-presentation motive is self-verification—the desire to have others perceive us as we genuinely perceive ourselves. This is sometimes known as open self-presentation, which consists of efforts to let others see you as you believe yourself to be. People generally are quite motivated to verify their existing self-view in the eyes of others. People, for example, often selectively elicit, recall, and accept feedback that confirms their self-conceptions. This statement does not mean that they wish to fool others about who they are. People often work hard to correct others whose impressions of them are mistaken. They may want to make a good impression, but they also want others (especially their friends) to have an accurate impression, one that is consistent with their own self-concept.

Self-presentation and impression management are part of everyone's life. Some people do these things more consciously and successfully than others. People differ in their ability to present themselves appropriately and create the impression they want. The more self-monitoring you are, the more sensitive you tend to be to strategic self-presentation concerns, poised, ready, and able to modify your behavior as you move from one situation to another.

The self is an enduring aspect of human personality, an invisible "inner core" that is stable over time and slow to change. The struggle to "find yourself" or "be true to yourself" is based on this view. Yet at least part of the self is malleable, molded by life experiences and different from one situation to the next. In this sense, the self is multifaceted and has many different faces. Each of us has a private self consisting of our innermost thoughts and feelings, memories, and self-views. We also have an outer self, portrayed by the roles we play and the way we present ourselves in public. In fulfilling our social obligations and presenting ourselves to others, we base our presentations on the complexity of our personalities, the social norms specifying appropriate behavior, and the motives of revealing who we really are, verifying our views of ourselves, and creating strategic impressions.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between being open with another person and being open to another person.
2. Explain O = S A T.
3. According to Johnson, what is the relationship between self-disclosure and liking?
4. List the eight possible benefits of self-disclosure.
5. Explain the relationship between self-disclosure and self-awareness.

PROBES

1. Johnson argues that "in order for the relationship to build and develop, both individuals have to disclose and be open to other people's disclosures." Do you agree? Is disclosure and openness to others necessary for the development of *all* relationships? Are there any exceptions?
2. Why does self-disclosure need to be reciprocal in the early stages of a relationship? Why can it be one-sided or nonreciprocal in some later stages of a relationship?
3. Johnson notes that "there are cycles of seeking intimacy and avoiding it." Explain what he means. Why is this important to understand and practice?
4. Give an example of how self-disclosure can function as a means of social control.
5. Is there a contradiction between Johnson's preference for "openness" and his argument that self-disclosure should be "appropriate"? Doesn't appropriateness require not always being open?
6. Johnson indicates that "you have a number of selves that are tied to certain situations and certain groups of people." Do you think he believes that people also have a "core" or stable, central self? Do you?

Expression: Speak for Yourself with Clarity and Power

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen

This is another excerpt from the book *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* by three people connected with the Harvard Negotiation Project. I explained that project when I introduced the essay by these authors in Chapter 3.

The first short paragraph may be a little confusing, because it includes a brief summary of the rest of Stone, Patton, and Heen's book up to this point. Here's some clarification: Their book's first piece of advice for beginning a difficult conversation is to "begin from the Third Story." This means that you start not with your view or the other person's view but with a view of the situation and topic from a third person's perspective, outside both your own and the other person's points of view. Their second piece of advice is that you listen to the other person's story with a sincere desire to understand it. Their third suggestion is the topic of this reading: In order for a difficult conversation to succeed, you need to express yourself.

They point out that your goal should not be eloquence or powerful persuasion but candid and sincere explanation. Then they review some pitfalls that often undercut people's abilities to express themselves clearly. The first is the belief, held by some, that my opinion isn't worthy or valuable enough to express. It is valuable, they emphasize, just as the other person's is, too. The second pitfall is "self-sabotage," and they explain what it is and how to avoid it. Then they make essentially the same point *Bridges Not Walls* makes in Chapter 3. What matters most. New York:

to be sure that your views are present in the relationship, and even though expressing yourself can be difficult, it gives the relationship a chance to change and get stronger.

Next come some practical suggestions, the first of which is, "Start with what matters most." You should also be straightforward, saying what you mean rather than making the other person(s) guess what's important to you. The authors point out that this step often takes some reflection on your part. You need to figure out what you are really thinking and feeling, and then say it directly. They also suggest that you "avoid easing in" to your topic, starting instead with as explicit and direct a statement as you can muster.

Some of the authors' next four suggestions are stated as "don'ts" rather than "dos," but each is very useful. They advise you to keep your story as complex as the interpersonal situation actually is; as they put it, "When we try to be simple, we often end up being incomplete." Complexity can be communicated with what they call "the And stance." This advice echoes what I wrote about the word "and" in Chapter 4.

Rather than presenting your conclusions as *The Truth*, they recommend what Jack Gibb calls "provisionalism" in his essay on Defensiveness in Chapter 9. They also remind you to share where your conclusions come from and to avoid "always and never" language.

Stone, Patton, and Heen wrap up this treatment of self-expression with the suggestions that you help your conversation partner understand you by asking them to paraphrase what you've said, and to explain how they see things differently and why.

There is some good advice here. And, although the authors don't emphasize it, their advice is grounded in solid communication theory.

MAIN IDEAS

- Difficult conversations won't succeed until both or all persons clearly express themselves.
- Your overall goal should be clarity, not eloquence.
- Remember that you are entitled to be heard, just as the other person is; feel entitled and encouraged, and not obligated.
- Start with what matters most and don't make them guess what you mean.
- Include the complexity of your motives, preferences, and ideas.
- Use "Me-Me And" statements, like "I do think you are bright and talented, and I think you're not working hard enough."
- Present your conclusions provisionally, rather than as *The Truth*.
- Share where your conclusions come from.
- Avoid "Always" and "Never"; give the other(s) room to change.
- Ask them to paraphrase back and how they see the situation differently.

Beginning from the Third Story is a productive way to open a conversation. Listening to the other person's story with a real desire to learn what they are thinking and feeling is a crucial next step. But understanding them is

rarely the end of the matter; the other person also needs to hear *your* story. You need to express yourself.

ORATORS NEED NOT APPLY

Expressing yourself well in a difficult conversation has nothing to do with how big your vocabulary is or how eloquent or quick-witted you are. Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, Jr. were great orators, but in difficult conversations their powers of oration would be of no particular assistance.

In a difficult conversation your primary task is not to persuade, impress, trick, outwit, convert, or win over the other person. It is to express what you see and why you see it that way, how you feel, and maybe who you are. Self-significantly further than eloquence and wit.

In the first part of this chapter we take up the issue of entitlement. To communicate with clarity and power, you must first negotiate yourself into a place where you truly believe that what you want to express is worthy of expression—a belief that your views and feelings are as important as anyone else's. Period. In the second part of the chapter, we look at how to figure out *what* you want to express and *how* you might best express it. We'll examine several common but significant expression errors, ways to avoid them, and methods for expressing yourself well.

YOU'RE ENTITLED (YES, YOU)

John, a second-year law student, was preparing to meet with a well-respected federal judge to discuss several concerns he had about his upcoming clerkship. The judge had a reputation for being a sometimes prickly and argumentative fellow, and John was anxious about losing his courage once he stepped into the judge's chambers.

John's favorite professor offered advice: "Whenever I have felt intimidated or mistreated by someone above me, I remember this—we are all equal in the eyes of God."

No More, But No Less

Regardless of our spiritual orientation, we can all benefit from the message: No matter who we are, no matter how high and mighty we fancy ourselves, or how low and unworthy we may feel, we all deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. My views and feelings are as legitimate, valuable, and important as yours—no more, but no less. For some people, that's utterly obvious. For others, it comes as important news....

Beware Self-Sabotage

Sometimes we can feel trapped between the belief that we should stand up for ourselves and a hidden feeling that we don't deserve to be heard, that we're not entitled. In this situation our unconscious mind can offer a devious—and illusory—"solution": We go through the motions of trying, but incompetently, so that in the end we fail. We wait to speak until there's not enough time to deal with our concerns. We conveniently forget our materials. All our points suddenly disappear from our head. And voilà! All of our interests are satisfied: we can feel good about trying, and secretly satisfied that we didn't succeed. This is the art of self-sabotage.

If this feels like a familiar trick in your repertoire, then you may need to pay more attention to when you are feeling ambivalent. When you sense that vaguely sick or confused feeling, imagine an enormous STOP sign to halt you in your tracks. Before proceeding, you need to engage your Identity Conversation. Why aren't you entitled? Whose voice from your past do you hear in your head telling you you're not? What would you need to feel fully entitled to speak up?

Failure to Express Yourself Keeps You Out of the Relationship

The ferry tickets to the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, read like many transportation tickets. Perforated in the middle, the ticket carries a warning that it will be "void if detached."

We run the same risks in difficult conversations. When we fail to share what's most important to us, we detach ourselves from others and damage our relationships.

Most of us actually prefer being with someone who will speak their mind. Angela broke off her engagement because her fiancé was "too nice." He never stated a preference, never argued, never raised his voice, never asked for anything. While she appreciated his kindness, she felt something was missing: him.

If you are sometimes lonely or despondent and never share this with those close to you, then you deny them the chance to come to know a part of you. You presume that they will not respect or like or admire you as much if they knew the way you really think and feel. But it's hard to present only this sanitized version of yourself. Often, to hide parts of who we are, we end up hiding all of who we are. And so we present a front that appears lifeless and removed.

Expressing yourself can be difficult and trying, but it gives the relationship a chance to change and to become stronger. Callie, a Native American woman, did not feel particularly close to her co-workers at a tutoring program for troubled teens. Partly because they were white, she suspected they wouldn't really understand her; indeed, she often found them to be insensitive.

But one day she took a risk and shared some stories. She described how she had been called names and teased when she was younger, and how for years she yearned to be "normal." These revelations significantly changed her relationship with her colleagues, who came to have great admiration for her. Her colleagues, in turn, felt encouraged to share their own stories of feeling left out or awkward. If Callie had not shared her story, she would have deprived her colleagues of the chance to rebut a stereotype she herself harbored—that "white people don't understand and don't care." And she wouldn't have offered them the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to understand and care about her.

A relationship takes hold and grows when both participants experience themselves and the other as being authentic. Such relationships are both more comfortable (it's more relaxing to be yourself) and nourishing to the soul ("My boss knows some of my vulnerabilities and still thinks I'm okay").

Feel Entitled, Feel Encouraged, but Don't Feel Obligated

You are entitled to express yourself. If you do not believe this to your core then you've got some work to do.

But being entitled doesn't mean you're obligated. That turns entitlement into another way to beat yourself up: "I should be saying what's on my mind, but I'm too afraid. I can't do anything right!" Expressing yourself is often extremely difficult. Finding the courage to do it is a lifelong process. If you aren't doing it as much as you'd like, it's something to work on, but not something to punish yourself about.

SPEAK THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The first step toward expressing yourself is finding your sense of entitlement to speak up; the next step is figuring out what, exactly, you want to say.

Start with What Matters Most

There's no better place to begin your story than with what is at the very heart of the matter for you: "For me, what this is really about is.... What I'm feeling is.... What is important to me is...."

Sharing what is important to you is common sense, and yet it's advice we often neglect. Consider the story of Charlie, the oldest of four brothers, who wants to improve his relationship with his youngest brother, sixteen-year-old Gage. Gage is dyslexic, which is especially tough since his older brothers all graduated near the top of their high school classes and went to college on academic scholarships. Gage struggles in school, is prone to act out, and has increasingly turned to drinking for solace.

Charlie wants to help by offering the benefit of his experience and advice: "You should definitely do the debate team. The coach is great and it will help

your college applications." And, "You know, Gage, don't overdo the drinking thing. It can really be bad news." But whatever Charlie says makes Gage feel criticized, defensive, and patronized. As a result, the two brothers have grown increasingly distant.

When we asked Charlie why the relationship is important to him, the story took a different turn. Charlie admires the way Gage works so hard to succeed. He feels bad about how he treated Gage when they were younger. And ultimately, it turns out that Charlie needs deeply to feel like a good brother, who loves and is loved in turn. As he revealed this, Charlie cried.

When Charlie finally shared these things with his brother, Gage was riveted. Charlie needed *him*. Charlie needed Gage's help in being a good brother. It proved a turning point in their relationship.

Gage would have had to be a mind reader to perceive even a hint of these meanings in Charlie's original communication. The heart of the message simply wasn't there. Nor was there a hint of the enormous depth of feelings at stake. Instead, there was a completely different message in its place: "You're a screw-up who needs my help and is too dumb to ask for it."

This is unfortunately all too typical of many difficult conversations. We say the least important things, sometimes over and over again, and wonder why the other person doesn't realize what we really think and how we really feel.

As you embark upon a difficult conversation, ask yourself, "Have I said what is at the heart of the matter for me? Have I shared what is at stake?" If not, ask yourself why, and see if you can find the courage to try.

Say What You Mean: Don't Make Them Guess

One way we often skirt sharing things that are important to us is by embedding them in the subtext of the conversation rather than simply stating them outright.

Rely on Subtext Think back to the Introduction, where we discussed the dilemma of whether to engage in a conversation or to try to avoid it. One common way to manage this dilemma—especially when you're not sure you're really entitled to bring something up—is to communicate through subtext. You put your message across indirectly, through jokes, questions, offhand comments, or body language.

Bringing it up by not quite bringing it up seems a happy medium between being and engaging. It is a way of doing neither and doing both. The problem is to the extent you are doing both, you're doing both badly. You end up triggering all of the problems you worried you'd create by bringing it up, without getting the benefit of clearly saying what you want to say.

Imagine that you and your husband have usually spent Saturdays sleeping in, puttering around the house, walking the dog, or doing errands together. Recently, however, he has discovered golf, and has begun playing 18 holes every Saturday morning. Your Saturday regime has never been particularly

missing it. The two of you don't spend much time alone together during the rest of the week, and as a result, you're feeling more and more irritated with his new hobby.

You could avoid conflict altogether by simply saying nothing, though as we've seen, your unhappiness would probably still leak out in spite of yourself. Or you might try to bring it up indirectly: "Honey, there's really a lot to be done around the house this weekend." "Is golf so important that you need to play it this often?" "Honey, you are simply playing too much golf!"

None of these comments conveys what you really mean, which is: "I want to spend more time with you." Let's consider the text and subtext of what each statement is saying:

"Honey, there's really a lot to be done around the house this weekend." This comment falls short on several grounds. First, it's simply the wrong subject. Working around the house is related to but different from spending time together. Second, even if work were the issue, the statement is shared as "truth." Your husband can reply, "There's not that much to do, and we'll talk about it when I get back."

"Is golf so important that you need to play it this often?" This is a classic example of a statement masquerading as a question. It's obvious that the meaning of the comment is conveyed in the subtext. What is less obvious is what the meaning is supposed to be. Your tone conveys anger or frustration. But it's not clear what is causing the anger or what your husband is supposed to do about it. Are you angry that your husband is engaged in a meaningless sport rather than community service or household chores? Are you angry that he's not taking you along? Are you angry that you aren't spending enough time together? How would he know?

"Honey, you are simply playing too much golf!" This statement is an opinion couched as a fact. Your husband is left to wonder, "Too much golf in relation to what?" "How much golf is too much golf?" "How much would be an appropriate amount of golf?" "Even if I am playing too much golf, so what?" Of course, even if he knew the answers to these questions, he would not have received the message intended. The gap between "You are playing too much golf" and "I would like to spend more time with you" is just too great.

To do better, you need to figure out what you are really thinking and feeling, and then say it directly: "I'd like to spend more time with you, and Saturday morning was one of the few times we had to spend together. As a result, I'm finding your interest in golf irritating."

Sometimes, you'll find yourself wishing you didn't have to be explicit. You wish the other person already knew that there was a problem and would do something about it. This is a common and understandable fantasy—our ideal mate or perfect colleague should be able to read our mind and meet our needs without our having to ask. Unfortunately, such people don't exist. Over time we may come to know better how we really feel.

perfect. Being disappointed that someone isn't reading our mind is one of *our* contributions to the problem.

Avoid Easing In A related and often destructive way to communicate through subtext is what Professor Chris Argyris of Harvard Business School has called *easing in*. Easing in is where you try to soften a message by delivering it indirectly through hints and leading questions. This is all too common in performance reviews: "So, how do you think you've done?" "Do you think you've really done as much as you could have?" "I have the same problem, but it probably would have been a little better to . . . Wouldn't you agree?"

Easing in conveys three messages: "Have a view!" "This is too embarrassing to discuss directly," and "I'm not going to be straight with you." Not surprisingly, these messages increase both sides' anxiety and defensiveness. And the recipient's imagination almost always conjures up a message worse than the real one.

A better approach is to make the subject clear and discussable by stating your thoughts straight out, while also indicating, honestly, that you are interested in whether the other person sees the situation differently and, if so, how: "Based on what I know, it seems to me that you might have gotten more done. However, you know more about what happened. In what ways would you see it differently?" Then if you disagree, you can talk directly about how to test or otherwise reconcile or deal with your different views.

Don't Make Your Story Simplistic: Use the "Me-Me" And

We've all learned that for others to understand us, we need to make what we say clear and simple. Fair enough, as far as it goes. The problem is this: What's going on in our heads is often a jumble of complex thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and perceptions. When we try to be simple, we often end up being incomplete.

Imagine that you receive a memo from a co-worker that leaves you confused. You are thinking, "This memo shows incredible creativity, and at the same time is so badly organized that it makes me crazy." In your attempt to be clear, you say, "Your memo is so badly organized it makes me crazy," or worse, "Your memo makes me crazy."

You can avoid oversimplifying by using the *Me-Me And*. The *And Stance* recognizes that each of various perceptions, feelings, and assumptions is important to talk about. This is true of the other person's perceptions *and* your perceptions, the other person's feelings *and* yours. It's also true of the various perceptions, feelings, and assumptions that are going on *just inside you*. The "and" in this case is connecting two aspects of what you think or feel. And though complex, it's both clear and accurate. *Me-Me And* statements sound like this:

I do think you are bright and talented, *and* I think you're not working hard enough.

I feel badly for how rough things have been for you, *and* I'm feeling disap-

I'm upset with myself for not noticing that you were so lonely. *And I* was having problems during that time.

I feel relieved and happy that I finally went through with the divorce—it was the right decision. *And I* do miss him sometimes.

The Me-Me And is also useful for overcoming a common obstacle to having a difficult conversation: the fear of being misunderstood. You think your team would be the best one to take on a new client, but fear that it will sound self-serving, that you're in it only for the glory and the bonus. If this is the fear, share it along with your argument: "I have a view on this that I want to share, and I have to say that I'm nervous about doing so because I'm afraid it may sound self-serving. So if you see anything in what I say that doesn't seem legitimate, please say so and let's discuss it." Or, in a different situation, "I'm having a strong reaction here that I'd like to share, and I'm worried about feeling embarrassed if I'm not able to be clear or unemotional at first. I hope if that happens that you'll bear with me and help me stay with it until I can put it succinctly."

TELLING YOUR STORY WITH CLARITY: THREE GUIDELINES

Obviously, how you express yourself makes a difference. How you say what you want to say will determine, in part, how others respond to you, and how the conversation will go. So when you choose to share something important, you'll want to do so in a way that will maximize the chance that the other person will understand and respond productively. Clarity is the key.

1. Don't Present Your Conclusions as *The Truth*

Some aspects of difficult conversations will continue to be rough even when you communicate with great skill: sharing feelings of vulnerability, delivering bad news, learning something painful about how others see you. But presenting your story as the truth—which creates resentment, defensiveness, and leads to arguments—is a wholly avoidable disaster.

It is an easy mistake to make. It's based on an error of thought: we often experience our beliefs, opinions, and judgments as facts. When you're arguing about a favorite movie or food or sports hero, sharing judgment as the truth is fine. But in difficult conversations it doesn't wash. Facts are facts. Everything else is everything else. And you need to be scrupulously vigilant about the distinction....

Some words—like "attractive," "ugly," "good," and "bad"—carry judgments that are obvious. But be careful with words like "inappropriate," "should," or "professional." The judgments contained in these words are less obvious, but can still provoke the "When are you *going* to tell me that?"

something is "inappropriate," preface your judgment with "My view is that...." Better still, avoid these words altogether.

This is not an argument that there is no truth, or that all opinions are equally valid. It simply distinguishes opinion from fact, and allows you to have a careful discussion that leads to better understanding and better decisions rather than to defensiveness and pointless fighting.

2. Where Your Conclusions Come From

The first step toward clarity, then, is to share your conclusions and opinions as conclusions and opinions and not as the truth. The second step is to share where your conclusions come from—the information you have and how you have gathered it.

You have information about yourself that the other person has no access to. That kind of information can be important; consider sharing it. And you have life experiences that are influencing what you think and why, as well as how you feel. When you tell these stories, it puts some meat onto the bones of your views.

You and your wife argue about whether to send your daughter, Carol, to private school. Your wife says, "I really think we should do it this year. It's an important age and I know we can come up with the money." You say in response, "I think she's doing fine in public school. I think we should keep her there."

If this conversation is going to get anywhere, the two of you need to share where these conclusions come from: What specific information is in your heads? What past experiences influence how you're thinking about this? You need to share your own experience in private school—the fear you felt the first few months, the sense of never quite fitting in. How guilty you felt that your parents weren't able to buy a car because they were paying your tuition for so many years. Tell that story with all the vividness and detail that's in your head as you discuss your concerns about the decision. Nothing else you say will make sense if your wife is unaware of the experiences that inform your feelings on this subject.

3. Don't Exaggerate with "Always" and "Never": Give Them Room to Change

In the heat of the moment, it's easy to express frustration through a bit of exaggeration: "Why do you *always* criticize my clothes?" "You *never* give one word of appreciation or encouragement. The only time anyone hears anything from you is when there's something wrong!"

"Always" and "never" do a pretty good job of conveying frustration, but they have two serious drawbacks. First, it is seldom strictly accurate that someone criticizes *every* time, or that they haven't at some point said *something*.

"That's not true. I said several nice things to you last year when you won the interoffice new idea competition"—a response that will most likely increase your exasperation.

"Always" and "never" also make it harder—rather than easier—for the other person to consider changing their behavior. In fact, "always" and "never" suggest that change will be difficult or impossible. The implicit message is "What is wrong with you such that you are driven to criticize my clothes?" or even "You are obviously incapable of acting like a normal person."

A better approach is to proceed as if (however hard it may be to believe) the other person is simply unaware of the impact of their actions on you, and being a good person, would certainly wish to change their behavior once they became aware of it. You could say something like: "When you tell me my suit reminds you of wrinkled old curtains, I feel hurt. Criticizing my clothes feels like an attack on my judgment and makes me feel incompetent." If you can also suggest what you would wish to hear instead, so much the better: "I wish I could feel more often like you believed in me. It would really feel great to hear even something as simple as, 'I think that color looks good on you.' Anything as long as it was positive."

The key is to communicate your feelings in a way that invites and encourages the recipient to consider new ways of behaving, rather than suggesting they're a schmuck and it's too bad there's nothing they can do about it.

HELP THEM UNDERSTAND YOU

It's not easy to step into someone else's story. It's especially hard when the issues are emotionally charged or when your views are rooted in a different generation or radically dissimilar corporate culture. You'll need their help in understanding them. And they'll need your help in understanding you.

If you feel overwhelmed with anxiety when leaving your children with a babysitter, and your husband says that you should "just learn to relax," you can express your anxiety in terms he might understand: "It's like your fear of flying. You know how when I try to tell you to relax during take-off it has no impact, and in fact it makes it worse? Well this is the same sort of thing."

And recognize that different people take in information at different speeds and in different ways. For example, some people are visually oriented. For them, you may want to use visual metaphors and refer to pictures or, in a business setting, charts. Some people prefer to get their arms around the whole problem first, and can't listen to anything else you say until they do. Others like all the details up front. Pay attention to these differences.

Ask Them to Paraphrase Back

Paraphrasing the other person helps you check your understanding and helps them know you've been heard. You can say, "I want to make sure I understand you correctly. Can you paraphrase what I just said?"

are check to see if I'm being clear. Would you mind just playing back what you've heard me say so far?"

Ask How They See It Differently—and Why

Explaining your story clearly is a first step toward being understood. But don't expect instant success. Real understanding may take some back and forth. If the other person seems puzzled or unpersuaded by your story, rather than putting more forcefully or trying to tell it in a different way, ask how they see it. In particular, ask how they see it differently.

A common tendency is to ask for agreement, perhaps because it's reassuring. "Does that make sense?" "Wouldn't you agree?" But asking the other person how they see it differently is more helpful. If you ask for agreement, people may be reluctant to share their doubts and reservations. They aren't sure whether you really want to hear them. They say, "Yes, I suppose so," but you don't know whether they're actually thinking, "Yes, in a limited, warped kind of way that's just like you." If you ask explicitly for how they see it differently, you are more likely to discover their true reaction. Then you can begin to have a real conversation.

...

The secret of powerful expression is recognizing that you are the ultimate authority on you. You are an expert on what you think, how you feel, and why you've come to this place. If you think it or feel it, you are entitled to say it, and no one can legitimately contradict you. You only get in trouble if you try to assert what you are not the final authority on—who is right, who intended what, what happened. Speak fully the range of your experience and you will be clear. Speak for yourself and you can speak with power.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe how "self-sabotage" can cripple effective expression.
2. What does it mean to say that "failure to express yourself keeps you out of the relationship"?
3. What does it mean to "rely on subtext"?
4. Write out three "Me-Me And" statements that reflect different scenarios.
5. What do these authors advise you to use in place of "always" and "never"?

PROBES

1. "Speak to the heart of the matter" is simple to say and can be difficult to do. You need to pause to ask yourself what's the main issue for you, and to move away from simplistic blaming statements. Phrase some questions that you can ask the other person about the heart of the matter for you.