

CHAPTER 5

Communication

Verbal and nonverbal communication among group members defines much team life. Individual goals, team goals, structure, and norms are evident in the communication patterns that develop among members. Tasks are accomplished and relationships managed through interpersonal interaction. Yet not all communication is positive, and as a result, team performance can be compromised. This chapter describes communication skills and patterns that lead to team success. It also identifies specific strategies members can adopt to improve their ability to communicate effectively. The chapter ends with a discussion about virtual communication and the benefits and challenges of virtual teams.

CASE 5.1: THE APPRENTICE

The TV reality show The Apprentice first aired on NBC during the winter of 2004 and quickly became the hit that it is today. At the beginning of each season, 16 contestants are divided into two teams that compete against each other for the ultimate prize of becoming the president of one of Donald Trump's companies. Every week the two teams face off in various challenges, ranging from selling lemonade on the streets of New York City to organizing charity events. The project leader of the losing team must face Trump in the boardroom and explain why the team did not succeed. Trump then identifies a member of the team who, in his opinion, was most responsible for the loss and issues his now famous decree, "You're fired."

In week two of the first season, the two teams, Versacorp (all men) and Protégé (all women), were given the task of designing an advertising campaign for a private jet service. Each team chose a project leader and began to structure the task. The men made a strategic error when they decided not to conduct customer interviews. Not knowing the distinguishing characteristics or the desires of the customer proved to be fatal and led to Versacorp's downfall. In addition, one of the more eccentric members of the team, Sam, talked excessively during planning sessions, frequently getting off topic. In one of the meetings, when he spent valuable project time lying on the floor of a conference room taking a nap, his credibility was compromised. As a result, when he later tried to interject his ideas and influence other members, he was interrupted by the project leader, Jason, and marginalized.

In contrast to the men, Protégé met with the customer and eventually decided upon an advertising campaign that used sexual overtones in its print ads. However, not all the members were comfortable using that approach, as it risked offending the customer. In the process of discussing options and making decisions, a number of

members had different opinions, and tempers flared. Even though the women won the competition, it became obvious that there were serious interpersonal problems on their team. Two of the members, Omarosa and Erika, had engaged in a number of arguments, and other members of the team were concerned that their dislike for each other would hurt the team's performance in the future.

For this challenge, Trump asked Donny Deutsch, the principal of a successful advertising agency in New York City, to decide the winning proposal. Deutsch and his two associates were torn between the men and the women. The sex appeal in the women's presentation may not have been appropriate for an actual print campaign, but it showed that they were more creative and willing to take risks. Ultimately, these qualities persuaded Deutsch to declare the women victorious. In addition, he commented that their presentation was sharper and more persuasive than that of the men. Their ability to communicate their ideas with passion and enthusiasm connected well with Deutsch.

After losing the task, Jason, the project manager for the men's team, identified Sam as the team's biggest problem. Jason explained to Trump how Sam failed the group by literally falling asleep during the project and not caring about the team's performance. Sam told Trump that Jason was just an average leader who made many mistakes, including not meeting with the customer. He added that because the team did not take the time to thoroughly understand the customer's needs, the project plan was flawed from the start. Thus, Sam didn't respect Jason's leadership and became passively detached. In the end, Trump held the team leader, Jason, responsible and fired him; Sam was spared. However, the group members became so frustrated with him that they decided to make him team leader for the next project in an effort to get him to "put up or shut up." While this may have been a strategic move to deal with Sam, the team suffered, losing the next competition. Although the women's team was winning competitions, interpersonal conflicts began taking their toll. Hostility and mistrust among members began to compromise the team's ability to perform.

Case Study Discussion Questions

- What should the men do about Sam? How do you view members who don't exactly fit in with the group? Is Sam a resource or a liability to the team? Explain.
- Two of the women strongly dislike each other. How would you handle that situation?
- What do you typically do in group situations when people are angry and start attacking one another? What do you do when others challenge you?
- What communication skills are needed in the men's group? In the women's group?

In an article in *Business Communication Quarterly*, Kinnick and Parton (2005) describe the results of a content analysis they performed on all 15 episodes from the first season of *The Apprentice*. They examined the following communication skills in each of the episodes: oral and written communications, interpersonal communication, teamwork skills, intercultural communication, negotiating skills, and ethical communication. In addition, they examined Trump's view of how those skills influenced individual and team performance. Trump and his associates identified poor communication skills as a factor in 5 of the 15 team losses. Poor communication was also cited as a factor in more than half of the individual firings. The last five players in the competition at the end of the season were

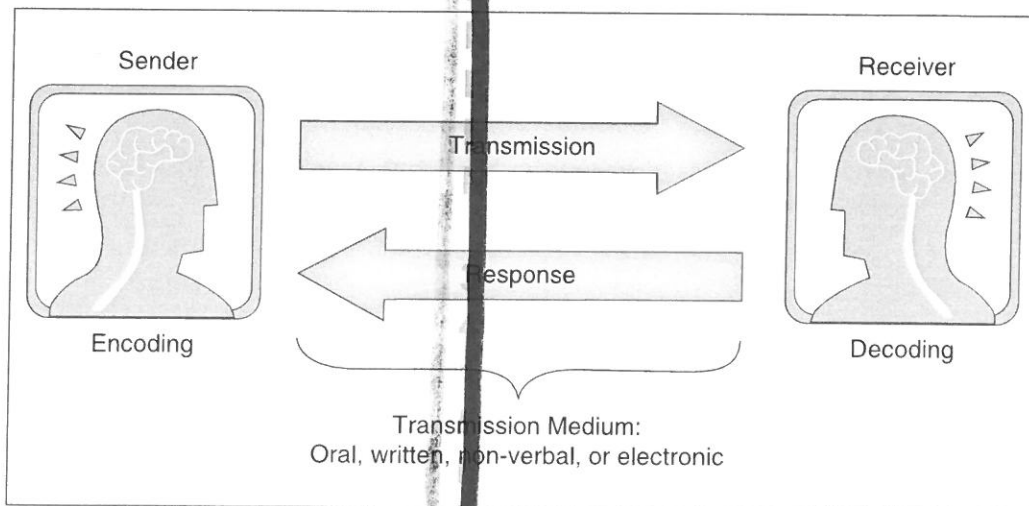
considerably more likely to be praised for their communication skills than were the first five who were eliminated.

Communication skills are foundational for individual, team, and organizational success (Kinnick & Parton, 2005). For example, oral communication and interpersonal skills are often cited as the most important criteria in evaluating job candidates. Interpersonal skills were mentioned more frequently than any other competency listed in classified ads for entry-level jobs in 10 major metropolitan newspapers. Not surprisingly, the U.S. Department of Labor has identified communication and interpersonal skills as core requirements for future workers. Colleges work hard to prepare individuals for professional success by helping them develop these skills through team-based learning activities and class projects (Kalliath & Laiken, 2006). And once employees are hired, organizations invest significant resources to enhance their communication skills. According to one study, 88% of U.S. companies provide communication skills training for their employees (*Industry Report*, 1999). The importance of communication cannot be overstated. Thus, it is important to thoroughly understand this powerful interpersonal process.

ENCODING AND DECODING MESSAGES

Communication is the exchange of thoughts, information, or ideas that results in mutual understanding between two or more people. The process requires at least one sender, one receiver, and a message that is transmitted within a communication medium. It begins with an idea or concept in the mind of the sender. He or she encodes the idea into meaningful symbols in the form of words, pictures, or gestures (i.e., language). The sender then selects a medium to transmit those symbols so the receiver can access them through one or more senses. The medium can be a face-to-face conversation, a piece of artwork hanging in an

Figure 5.1 Sending and Receiving Messages



art gallery, a text message, or any growing number of electronic transmission media. When the receiver receives the message, he or she must decode the symbols in order to interpret the message and understand the intent of the sender, as depicted below.

Meaningful communication takes place when the receiver accurately understands the message transmitted by the sender. However, this does not always happen perfectly. A multitude of potential problems can hinder the process and block understanding. The rest of the chapter examines the many ways in which a message can become distorted or misunderstood; it also suggests ways to minimize the potential for communication missteps.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

The use of verbal statements is one of the most common ways individuals communicate with one another. As team members work together to understand problems and manage projects, hundreds, if not thousands, of verbal comments are exchanged. A team member might be communicating a message at face value, or he or she may be implying hidden meanings or even multiple layers of meaning in a single statement. Because members do not always know the exact intent of one another's comments, there can be multiple interpretations and frequent misunderstandings. In the early stages of group development, team members have to learn the most effective way to interact with and understand that particular group.

Wheelan and her associates have developed a classification system called the Group Development Observation System (GDOS) as a way of categorizing and analyzing the verbal interactions that take place among group members (Wheelan, Davidson, & Tilin, 2003). The GDOS classifies statements into one of eight categories, and while statements can sometimes fit more than one category, trained observers are in agreement 85% to 95% of the time. The eight GDOS categories are as follows:

- *Dependency statements* are those that show an inclination to conform to the dominant mood of the group and to solicit direction from others.
- *Counterdependency statements* assert independence by resisting the current leadership and direction of the group.
- *Fight statements* directly challenge others using argumentativeness, criticism, or aggression.
- *Flight statements* are attempts to avoid work and demonstrate a lack of commitment to the group.
- *Pairing statements* are expressions of warmth, friendship, and support toward others.
- *Counterpairing statements* demonstrate an avoidance of intimacy and interpersonal connection by keeping the discussion distant and intellectual.
- *Work statements* are those that represent goal-directed and task-oriented efforts.
- *Unscorable statements* include unintelligible, inaudible, or fragmentary statements.

After observing 26 task groups in various stages of development, researchers identified 31,782 verbal statements made during one meeting for each of the groups. Wheelan,

Davidson, and Tilin (2003) found that established groups utilized twice as many task-related statements as compared with newly formed groups. In the early stages of group development, for example, there are more fight, flight, and dependency statements communicated among members than in later stages (Wheelan, 2005). Interestingly, they found that the number of pairing statements remain relatively stable. Approximately 17% of the statements made at any stage of development are supportive of others and meant to engender positive relationships (Wheelan, 2005).

The verbal statements of members of any group can be evaluated to determine whether or not members are committed, compliant, resistant, or disengaged from the team at any given time. Observing a member's consistent pattern of verbal statements over time is one possible way to determine that person's commitment to the task and people of the group. Dependency statements suggest compliance, whereas counterdependency and fight statements suggest resistance. Flight and counterpairing statements often indicate disengagement. Finally, pairing statements suggest commitment to other group members, while work statements suggest commitment to team goals.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

As verbal messages are being communicated, an equally important process of communication is taking place on a nonverbal level. Nonverbal cues from a speaker such as smiling, eye contact, or fidgetiness help listeners interpret the meaning behind the words a person is using to communicate a message. Listeners perceive these messages subconsciously and often have a difficult time articulating why they arrived at a certain understanding of a person's message. As the title of Malcolm Gladwell's (2005) book *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* suggests, this process of rapid cognition takes place in the blink of an eye and often outside of awareness. For instance, although the words are the same, the message below may be interpreted as having entirely different meanings based upon the nonverbal cues associated with it.

Table 5.1 Using Nonverbal Cues to Interpret Messages

Verbal Message	Nonverbal Cues	Possible Meanings
We need to be more prepared for the next project.	The speaker scans the group and gestures widely. Her facial expression demonstrates sincere pleading as she emphasizes the word <i>need</i> .	The speaker is desperate. For her, there is a lot riding on the success of the group.
We need to be more prepared for the next project.	The speaker emphasizes the word <i>prepared</i> as she looks intently at and leans toward a particular member. Her brow is furrowed and she appears frustrated.	The speaker is blaming one of the other members for the group's recent failure and hopes to shame that person into doing better in the future.
We need to be more prepared for the next project.	The speaker says this in a monotone voice with no energy, facial expression, or hand gestures. Her body is facing slightly away from the group.	The speaker is disengaged, does not actually care whether the group sees improvement, and does not plan to put in any extra effort.

Mehrabian's (1981) seminal research on the importance of nonverbal communication suggests that messages, especially those that express feelings, are overwhelmingly understood through nonverbal cues. The following percentages represent the relative contributions of the verbal and nonverbal components that a listener uses to interpret a message:

- 7% from verbal cues (words)
- 38% from vocal cues (volume, pitch, rhythm, etc.)
- 55% from facial expressions (smiling, frowning, etc.) and other body movements (arms crossed, eye contact, etc.)

Nonverbal cues such as physical appearance, facial expressions, level of eye contact, body movements, vocal qualities, and the physical space between members all contribute to the way a message is interpreted. An accurate perception of nonverbal communication helps the listener understand the intent of the speaker and is strongly related to social intelligence and interpersonal sensitivity (Goleman, 2006). So while an individual's "words" can be difficult to understand, nonverbal cues are even more subject to personal interpretation as listeners use their own subjective frame of reference to interpret the nonverbal expressions of others.

Nonverbal cues not only help members interpret verbal messages, they also help regulate the flow of conversation (Goleman, 2006). For example, when members want to interject a comment into a discussion, they may use any number of nonverbal prompts such as leaning forward, clearing their throats, making direct eye contact with the current speaker, or posing a facial expression that indicates a desire to speak. Additionally, if speakers receive positive nonverbal feedback from others while they are speaking (i.e., head nodding, eye contact, or smiling), they will continue with confidence that they are being heard. Speakers signal the end of their comments by relaxing their body posture, reducing verbal volume, or leaning back in their seat. These cues prompt others to respond or add their own thoughts. A more direct invitation might be to nod or gesture toward a particular member with an open hand, palm facing upward. Effective group facilitators frequently use these types of nonverbal cues to move members in and out of the conversation and to otherwise regulate the discussion.

POSTURING

Individuals use both verbal and nonverbal means to establish credibility and communicate ideas in a persuasive manner. Because people desire to be understood and respected, the use of posturing is common. Posturing and the use of identity markers are used to influence the perception, opinion, and approval of others and to bolster one's status within the team (Polzer, 2003). According to Polzer, "We do not communicate identity-relevant information solely for the benefit of others. . . . When we bring others to see us in a favorable light, we tend to boost our own self-image as we bask in their approval" (p. 3). Identity markers might include the following:

- *Physical appearance:* This includes how people are dressed, whether they have a well-groomed appearance, or their fitness level.

- *Personal office or room decorations:* The presence or absence of plaques, framed diplomas, photographs, or other indicators of success.
- *Body posture:* How much space a person takes up, whether their arms or legs are crossed, whether they stand up straight or slouch, the direction they are facing, strength of eye contact.
- *Demeanor:* Loud voice or soft, smiles or frowns, engaged or withdrawn, warm or cold, attentive or aloof.
- *Explicit statements:* Success stories that are shared verbally, statements of one's strengths, subtle references to past accomplishments.

The communication and utilization of these markers is driven by the need for self-enhancement. The self-enhancement motive relates to the desire to present oneself in a positive light to garner respect and admiration from others. This is commonly demonstrated on college campuses, for example, by identity markers such as fraternity or sorority T-shirts, sweatshirts, and accessories to identify as a member of an elite social group or by clothing, automobiles, and vacation trips to communicate wealth and social status. Leaders need to be attuned to both the subtle and blatant attempts of members to promote themselves. Self-promoting behavior can intimidate others and restrict the free expression of ideas, and it can be off-putting and hinder the development of trust and cohesion. It might also signal a strong need for recognition and admiration on the part of those who employ such tactics.

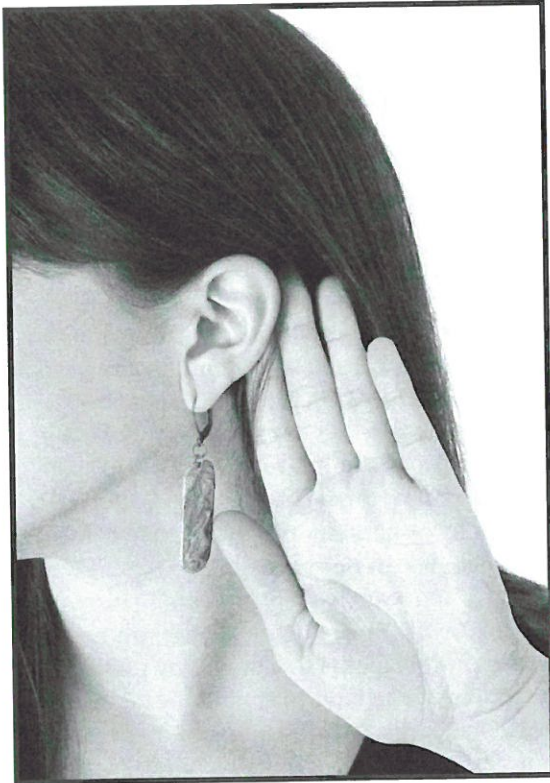
Unfortunately, members posture and perform for others in order to gain their respect and admiration at the expense of authenticity. Teams can become like families in which the members (siblings) compete for the approval of the team leaders (parents). This type of "sibling rivalry" in which the members compete for the favored child status can be a distraction for the team. One way a leader can help minimize this dynamic is by establishing the norms of authenticity, honesty, and transparency early on in the life of the team by sharing his or her own mistakes or weaknesses. This sends a strong message that members do not need to compete with one another for performance-based status but, instead, will be valued for their genuineness and humanity.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication skills, such as active listening and assertiveness, help make information processing more transparent. Actively trying to understand and interpret the verbal messages of others takes work. Simply asking another person to provide the evidence that led to certain conclusions can be very enlightening. Similarly, it is helpful to others when we describe the specific data and interpretation of that data that led to our conclusions. Advocating our ideas in a confident and comprehensive way is demonstrated in the practice of assertiveness. In a typical workgroup setting, assertiveness can take many forms such as promoting a new idea, lobbying for a policy change, or publicly supporting one method of resolving a problem over a number of alternatives. The following section describes the communication skills of active listening and assertiveness in detail.

Active Listening

Active listening is the key to accurately understanding what another person is saying. It requires effort and discipline. Yet group members are often preoccupied or distracted, and thus do not give 100% of their attention to one another (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995).



Instead, listeners may be busy comparing themselves with the speaker, mentally rehearsing what they will say next, daydreaming about a past experience, or wishing they were somewhere else. They might also be speculating about what is going on in the mind of the speaker (mind reading), filtering out parts of his or her message, or jumping to conclusions and offering premature advice. It is also all too common for some listeners to be more focused on debating and critiquing than actually hearing what is being said. In contrast to the benefits reaped when a person feels heard, contentiousness can elicit either a defensive reaction or passive detachment, compromising meaningful dialogue.

An accurate understanding of others is needed before a meaningful response can be made. Effective listeners suspend judgment in order to first understand the perspective of the speaker. This advanced developmental skill requires listeners to attempt to "get into the shoes" of the speaker and see the issue through his or her eyes before responding (Kegan, 1994). The comments of others will make more sense if understood from within that person's

perspective. Paying attention to posture, paraphrasing what is heard, and probing for deeper meaning are skills that facilitate this type of perspective taking and lead to a more accurate understanding of the messages that are communicated.

First, active listeners pay attention to their *posture*. Specifically, they use their physical posture to help them focus on what is being said. It also creates an interpersonal dynamic that signals to speakers that the listener is paying attention. The acronym SOLER describes five specific behaviors that encourage a listening posture:

S—Square: Face the person squarely.

O—Open: Keep an open posture without crossed arms or legs.

L—Lean slightly forward to communicate interest and engagement. Head nods and verbal encouragers like "uh-huh" and "yes!" are also effective.

E—Eye contact: Maintain direct eye contact according to appropriate social norms.

R—Relax: Stay relaxed. Listeners should be comfortable with silence where appropriate and allow the conversation to unfold without force.

By following these guidelines, listeners will be perceived as engaged and interested in what is being said. This approach helps the speaker to feel more comfortable in sharing information.

Paraphrasing is a powerful listening skill that validates others, builds trust, and invites deeper levels of disclosure. A paraphrase restates the message that was communicated in order to clarify and confirm an accurate understanding of that message. For example, in the following dialogue, Mary responds to her roommate's comments regarding the cleanliness of their room without appearing defensive or minimizing the problem. In this way, the paraphrase is an attempt to understand the roommate's concern before responding to it.

Sue: I hate that our room is constantly a mess. We can't live like this! I try to keep my side of the room clean, but yours is always a mess. I want to hang out with friends here, but I can't because I don't want them to see this place!

Mary: Okay, I understand that you're feeling frustrated with our room and the way it looks, and you're even embarrassed to have friends here because you don't want them to think you're sloppy. Am I hearing you right?

This paraphrase invites Sue to elaborate on her frustration because Mary has neither become defensive nor has she discouraged Sue's concern. At this point, Mary is simply listening and gaining a better understanding of the issue. Thus, the paraphrase ensures an accurate understanding of the situation, maintains a peaceful interaction, and affirms Sue that she has been heard before moving to the problem-solving phase of the conversation.

Probing is the third skill that facilitates active listening. In order to understand the ideas, opinions, and perspectives of others, a listener may need information beyond that which the speaker has already provided. A good question is often the catalyst to an information-rich response. Open-ended questions lead to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand because they stimulate reflective thinking and can be used to identify underlying assumptions. Once an accurate paraphrase has been communicated, probing questions can be used to solicit more specific, useful, or otherwise relevant information. Returning to the example of the messy roommate situation, Mary's response might include some of the following probing questions:

- What do you consider the messiest parts of our room?
- When were you thinking of having friends over?
- What are some realistic expectations for both of us?

- How can I be more sensitive to you in the future?
- What do you need from me right now?

These questions can be used to address issues and create meaningful dialogue. Instead of avoiding difficult issues, probing questions address them directly. Additionally, they validate the speaker by showing genuine interest or concern on behalf of the listener.

Probing with *open-ended questions* is an excellent way to gather information about someone's priorities, beliefs, and concerns because you give the respondent complete control over the content of his or her response. The material on which the respondent chooses to focus is likely the material most pressing or important to that person. Open-ended questions often begin with the words *how*, *what*, or *why*. Examples may include "What motivates you?" or "How could this process have been improved?" Open-ended questions can also come in the form of an invitation for the speaker to provide more detail. For instance, one might begin with "Describe for me . . ." or "Tell me in your own words . . .".

Hypothetical questions give insight into the state of mind of the speaker as well. These types of questions allow you to discover the nuanced thought process of your respondent and/or his or her comfort level with a given skill. Respectively, examples may include "Suppose you were the project manager on this task. How would you proceed?" or "If I were to give you the lesson plans, would you feel confident teaching the class tomorrow morning?"

Unlike the types of questions that we have discussed thus far, *closed-ended questions* aim to gather specific information, facts, or details. The range of responses available to your question's recipient is quite small, and his or her answer is likely to be short and to the point. Examples of closed-ended questions include "Did Kevin complete the spreadsheet for the meeting?" or "What is the fastest route to 6th Avenue?"

Finally, *forced-choice* questions call upon the respondent to make a choice. The answer to one of these questions will demonstrate the respondent's priorities and may guide a decision about how to move forward in a given scenario. Consider the following example: "The printing company is wondering whether or not it should go ahead and ship the signs with the typo. Would you rather the signs arrive on time, or that they are printed accurately?" Forced-choice questions are also frequently used in a negotiation if one is trying to limit the other person's options.

While the previous types of questions can all be productive within certain discussions, the following, however, are not. Leading questions, loaded questions, and multiple questions asked in rapid fire make it challenging for a recipient to respond productively. Instead, recipients are likely to feel challenged, intimidated, and confused. Leading and loaded questions often use harsh language and make unflattering assumptions in order to embed an accusation within a question. An example may be "Do you always pawn off your work onto other people?" or "How long have you been wasting the company's time dealing with personal issues at work?" Obviously, questions like these will be perceived negatively by the recipient and have the potential to compromise trust and goodwill in the relationship. It is rarely beneficial to make enemies, so questions should not be used as weapons.

Multiple questions refers to a string of questions asked in rapid progression that, while they may be related to the subject at hand, confuse and disorient the recipient. The following is an example of multiple questions: "How could the team have missed the deadline, and how do you know, and what are the consequences that we now face, and did you notify everyone, and who was supposed to have been keeping track of this?" By the end of this five-question series, it would be difficult for the responder to decide where to begin or to which question the asker truly wants an answer. Stressful situations can instigate the use of multiple questions. Therefore, when intensity mounts, it is helpful for members to slow down their speech and make discrete, productive, and answerable questions.

Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to express oneself directly and honestly without disrespecting or dishonoring another person. Assertive people are able to stand up for themselves and communicate their ideas firmly without bullying, patronizing, or manipulating others. Because group discussions can move quickly, teams frequently arrive at conclusions that are not well thought out or supported. Thus, it is important that members speak up either to promote other perspectives or to challenge ideas that are ill-conceived. Assertive members, therefore, are actively engaged in group discussions and avoid the extremes of being either too passive or too aggressive.

Baney (2004) suggests that assertiveness can best be expressed by including the following three components: I think, I feel, I want. The first step in this assertiveness formula is to describe one's thoughts about a particular situation. For example, a member of the team is often late for meetings, so the project leader might say something like: "I've noticed that you've been late to most of our recent meetings." Next, the leader describes his or her feelings about the situation: "It's frustrating to be interrupted when you arrive, and I never know if I should stop and bring you up to speed." Finally, the assertive person would make a respectful request: "Do you think you could make it a priority to arrive on time from here on out?" This interchange shows respect for the other person but also values one's own needs. According to the social style framework, drivers and expressives do much better at advocating their positions than do analyticians or amiables.

When making a point in a group setting, especially when responding to a particularly complex or important set of questions, assertive communicators pay attention to the introduction and conclusion of their comments. To start, a brief overview of their position will let others know what to expect. For example, an explanation of one's position may begin with "I'd like to discuss a few key areas where I think that the team could have been more organized." At the end of the comments, a concise summary can be given to reinforce the main ideas. Returning to the example at hand, a person might end his or her comments with "and I believe that these were the problem areas that led to the poor performance of our team." Opening and closing with clarity are useful practices that reinforce effective communication.

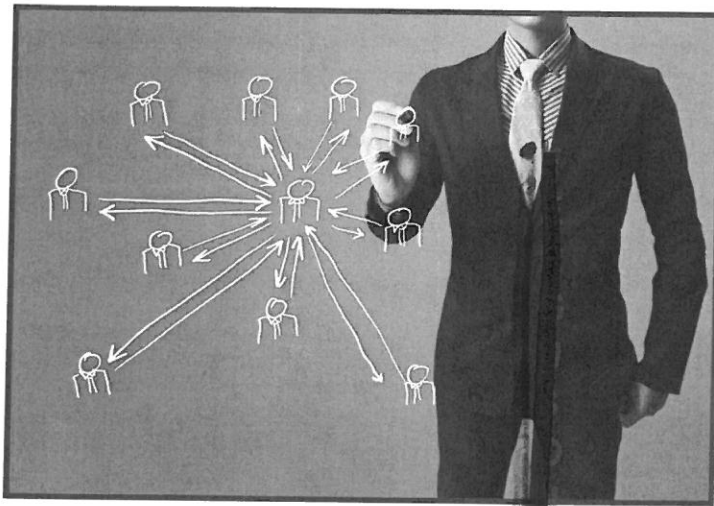
It is often beneficial to provide specific examples or anecdotes to give texture and nuanced understanding. Some people are more likely to remember interesting statistics or

quotes, for example, than general concepts. Memorable stories or illustrations not only reinforce the main concepts, they also help listeners remember the main concepts. In addition, supporting comments with data and examples not only makes the argument more interesting and informative, but also credible. However, there is a difference between this tactic and attempting to establish credibility by overusing confusing jargon that others do not understand. This can alienate others and decrease their desire to engage in meaningful dialogue.

At times, strong, assertive statements will provoke negative responses or questions from others. As discussed, an initial overview at the beginning of a response can be a useful tool in rephrasing and perhaps softening the nature of the question. For this reason, this strategy is an excellent one to employ when asked a leading or loaded question. If faced with multiple questions, the speaker can slow down the pace of the conversation by calling attention to the multitude of questions and acknowledging the desire to answer the questions one at a time. For example, an appropriate response to a hostile barrage of questions might be, "You clearly have a lot on your mind and are looking for some clarity. Let me see if I can explain my position, beginning with your first question." Finally, it is perfectly acceptable to acknowledge feeling ill-prepared or uncomfortable answering a question and, instead, choose not to respond at that particular time. For example, if one team member pushes another team member into making a commitment about a certain problem, he or she might need to say something like "There are several aspects of this situation about which I know very little, and I do not want to speculate. Can you give me a few days to think about it and get back to you?" In that way, he or she can buy time and formulate a more thoughtful response.

CENTRALIZED VERSUS DECENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION

Group researchers have observed that one of the most important features of group communication is the level of centralization (Brown & Miller, 2000). When one or two members do most of the talking and comments are routinely directed toward these members specifically, the group is said to have a centralized communication structure (Huang & Cummings, 2011). Conversely, when groups exhibit more balance in terms of who speaks and with what frequency, the group has a decentralized communication structure. In a decentralized structure, members engage in both advocacy (proposing their own views) and inquiry (exploring the views of others). Of course, due to logistical and time constraints on any given meeting, not everyone can be expected to comment on every topic. In larger groups, it can be very easy to situate oneself on the periphery and become marginally involved. In smaller groups, it is more difficult to be anonymous, and members may choose to confront those who are consistently not speaking up. Nonetheless, who speaks, how often they speak, and to whom they speak are each important characteristics of communication structure. The degree of communication centrality within a given group is influenced by the level of complexity of the group's task as well as the characteristics of individual group members.



Groups tend to adopt a more centralized communication structure if the task is relatively simple and become more decentralized as the tasks become more complex (Brown & Miller, 2000). This trend is due to the fact that task uncertainty and ambiguity lead to wider participation and a more open exchange of information. Put another way, complex tasks require cognitive flexibility and open discussions in order to thoroughly understand the issues and to make well-reasoned

decisions (Roy, 2001). Relatively straightforward tasks, on the other hand, are conducive to one or two people directing the discussion and coordinating the efforts of the group. Simpler tasks benefit from the efficiency of centralized communication, allowing group discussions to be more organized, efficient, and concrete.

In addition to task complexity, individual member characteristics influence the communication structure of the group. Some members speak often and with confidence, while others tend to be more hesitant. Individual member traits such as interpersonal dominance, perceived competence, and commitment to the group's task all serve to influence the degree of centrality in group communication. People with high interpersonal dominance have a strong need to be in control. Even if they are not the designated leader, they may attempt to take charge and direct the group. When members acquiesce and allow plans and meetings to be controlled by their dominant teammates, the communication becomes centralized. But sometimes members resist. When faced with dominant members, some group members form alliances or subgroups in order to create a balance of power and, thus, ensure a decentralized communication pattern where everyone's voice is heard.

During the "forming" stage of group development, members assess one another's knowledge, skills, and competencies. This is done partly to see how they might compare with their new teammates, but it is also done with the intent of taking inventory of the group's resources. Those who are perceived as competent and who possess important abilities are allotted greater amounts of influence over the decisions, direction, and dynamics of the group. However, the criteria used in this assessment are not always related to the task at hand. Sometimes members are given status based upon characteristics such as gender, physical attractiveness, education level, or professional success. For example, when medical doctors are given too much status while nurses or other health care professionals are marginalized, patient safety is compromised (Lingard et al., 2004). As a result, the health care industry has gone to great lengths to improve the quality of communication on

health care teams (Brock, Abu-Rish, Chiu, Hammer, Wilson, Vorvick, Blondon, Schaad, Liner, & Zierler, 2013).

Once a member is perceived to have high levels of competence, regardless of the reasoning behind this perception, and is granted status in the group, members will naturally direct their questions and comments to him or her. Members who perceive *themselves* as having competence are also more likely to speak up in discussions. Interestingly, there is a slight tendency for men to overestimate their knowledge and abilities (Lemme, 2006), possibly explaining why men tend to be more frequent contributors in mixed-gender groups (Dindia & Canary, 2006; Krollokke & Sorensen, 2006).

Commitment to the group's tasks and goals will also affect the level of member engagement. Highly motivated members will tend to be more active and contribute more frequently to discussions. They are more invested in the group's success, and will subsequently seek to be involved in major decisions. At the same time, there may certainly be members who are very committed to the task but withhold their comments and ideas from conversations. In these cases, other personal or circumstantial variables have intervened to reduce their perceived involvement. In order to establish balanced communication within the team, leaders have to figure out the reasons for poor participation and help low talkers become more active.

As group members interact, each establishes his or her place in the group relative to other members. A systems view of groups suggests that individual communication styles will depend upon the particular group composition within which members find themselves. For example, a dominant member might take over if there are no other dominant members in the group. As that member exerts control, submissive or passive members become more passive, in turn encouraging the dominant member to become even more dominant. Each member reacts to others in a reciprocal fashion. If there are a number of dominant members in a group, control and management of the group may be shared. Similarly, if no particular person has a great deal of competence in a given area, a member with moderate competence will likely be forced to become an active participant. The assessment of one's own competence is related to the perceived competence of other members. The same holds true for commitment to the group's task. If nobody is passionate about the goal or interested in taking charge, a member who normally does not take a leadership role might find him or herself doing just that. Each group has a unique configuration that influences how people act, interact, and communicate with others in that particular group. For this reason, the tasks and interpersonal roles that people fill will vary with each new group they experience.

The process of communication is complex and highly idiosyncratic. Different people can hear the same message but have completely different interpretations. The practice of reflection can help group members slow down the interpretation and evaluation of messages to improve the accuracy of understanding and thoughtfulness of responses. In addition, certain listening skills (posture, paraphrasing, and probing) can increase the likelihood that accurate understanding is taking place.

Group members can also learn to express themselves more intentionally. They can become more aware of how they are communicating observations, thoughts, feelings, or needs. Members can provide the data and reasoning that led to certain conclusions. In addition, members can enhance their ability to communicate by avoiding mixed

messages and becoming more assertive. Assertiveness is a form of communication that respects the opinions of others while directly stating one's own thoughts and perspectives.

Effective communication requires members to suspend their assumptions and judgments of others in order to stay open to new ideas. Members can learn to minimize their reactivity even when dialogue becomes spirited or difficult. In the most effective groups, members feel comfortable to freely express their views and engage in a balanced level of participation. When this happens, communication contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of group processing and team success.

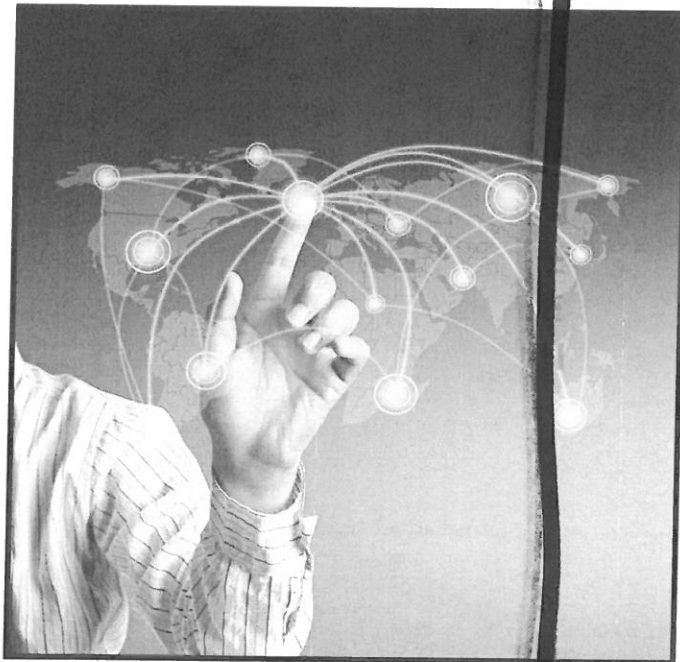
VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

Virtual teams bring geographically dispersed members together through electronic information and communication technologies to accomplish organizational tasks (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). The use of technology can significantly improve team efficiency and increase productivity, but they need to be actively managed (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005). Technology has become such an integral part of organizational life that some teams never meet face to face; they only exist in a virtual environment. Virtual teams and the technology that drives them offer the following benefits: (a) team compositions that increase quality and outcomes, (b) efficiency of communication, and (c) the development of intellectual capital.

Putting the right mix of people together without regard to geographic location allows managers to maximize knowledge, skills, and abilities (Blackburn, Furst, & Rosen, 2003). These types of diverse and specialized teams are especially necessary to solve complex

organizational problems and tasks. For instance, a team of school principals and district administrators working on educational reform might be able to benefit from the experience and knowledge of parallel committees in other states. The team might also benefit from the perspective of a curriculum specialist at a university who consults with school districts.

Virtual teaming allows diverse members to collaborate in ways that were heretofore difficult if not impossible. Virtual teams allow team members in various locations to interact without the need for face-to-face (F2F) meetings. Scheduling and attending meetings may be easier when workers can stay at their own desk (wherever



that may be) and participate in virtual meetings instead of flying in from various places around the world to meet in a central location. Since physical spaces and other arrangements such as travel and accommodations are not necessary, organizations can save both time and money. While virtual meetings may not be as efficient as F2F meetings (Levenson & Cohen, 2003), the financial and logistical benefits are attractive. Without the benefit of nonverbal clues, group communication can be ambiguous and cohesion can be difficult to build. These obstacles, however, can be overcome by effective leadership.

Improved Knowledge-Sharing

When geographical obstacles are removed, teams have access to subject matter experts from all over the globe. But those experts might live in different time zones and have technological limitations that prevent them from engaging in virtual meetings. Knowledge management systems assist members in capturing, storing, and cataloguing what they know so that others can access that knowledge and experience. Knowledge-sharing links team members together through a virtual repository of expertise. For example, Proctor and Gamble (P&G) has an electronic network that links 900 factories and 17 product development centers in 73 countries. In the past, it was difficult to know what new products were being developed in different locations, centers, and departments around the world. To address this issue, P&G purchased collaborative knowledge-sharing software that permits product developers to search a database of 200,000 existing product designs to see if a similar design or process already exists in another part of the company. As a result, the time it takes to develop new products has been reduced by 50% (Ante, 2001).

Buckman Labs, a chemical manufacturing company, has effectively pooled the expertise of 1,400 employees in over 90 nations through an electronic knowledge base (Buckman, 2004). For example, when one of its customers has an outbreak of a bacterial contamination that threatens production in a paper mill in Brazil, the local Buckman engineer in that part of the world can access the company knowledge base for possible solutions based upon the knowledge and experiences of engineers at other locations. In this way, problems can be solved more quickly and effectively than when field offices operate independently from one another. This type of quality customer service earned Buckman Labs the 2005 MAKE Award (Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise) from a panel of leading knowledge management experts.

Inherent Problems

Virtual teams are not without their problems; they tend to be abstract and ambiguous, and, by their nature, are challenging to manage. Davis (2004) found that problems within virtual teams take longer to identify and solutions longer to implement. The distance inherent in virtual teams may serve to (a) amplify dysfunction, (b) dilute leadership, and (c) weaken human relations and team processes. Virtual teams can be especially difficult to manage in terms of goal definition, task distribution, coordination, and member motivation.

Teamwork requires interdependence. Members need to have a level of trust that their teammates are equally committed to the goals of the group and will do their part to achieve those goals (Aubert & Kelsey, 2003). In organizational contexts, trust is built by assessing

the ability, benevolence, and integrity of other group members (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In virtual groups the lack of face-to-face interaction makes it difficult to carry out this assessment. Therefore, virtual teams struggle to gain a level of trust that maximizes group potential. When group members interact in person, they are able to observe one another and draw conclusions about a number of variables including intellectual ability, past experiences, interpersonal styles, and personality type. Virtual members have less information from which to make assessments. Thus, virtual environments can be more tenuous and less trusting (Gibson & Manuel, 2003).

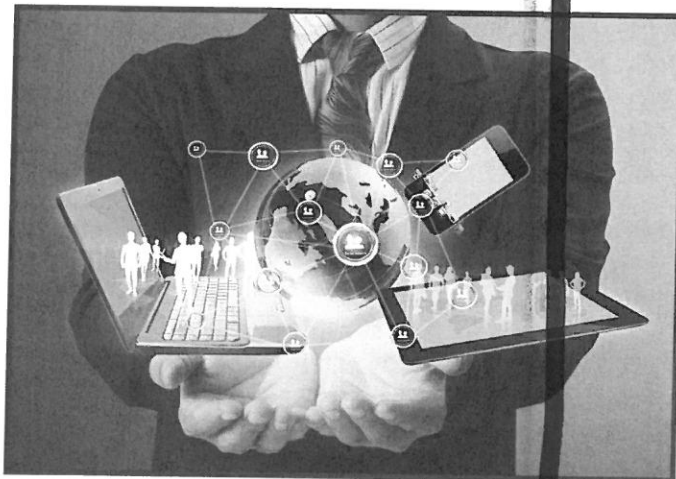
In addition to developing trust, virtual groups may also have a difficult time creating a shared vision. Shared vision includes not only an understanding of the group's goal but also a shared commitment to achieving it. In a virtual environment, it can be difficult to assess commitment levels. Because virtual members typically interact less frequently and with less perceptual richness, they do not have the opportunity to observe interpersonal characteristics such as vocal tone, body language, and facial expressions. Thus, it is difficult to determine who is invested in the success of the group.

Communication Challenges

Communication is more of a challenge for virtual teams than in F2F teams (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). Since trust is difficult to achieve, members are more reluctant to express their opinions in virtual discussions (Bales, Dickson, Sherman, Bauer, & LaGanke, 2002). Contributions in a virtual environment lack the nonverbal and social context to understand others accurately and to be understood. Teams take longer to make decisions and arrive at a shared understanding. In an F2F meeting, an idea can be acknowledged and agreed upon

through nods, smiles, or verbal responses. Puzzled looks, shrugs, and raised eyebrows signal a lack of understanding and a request for more information. Even the most sophisticated computer-mediated communication channels are not able to capture the richness of F2F exchanges (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003).

Obviously, it is more difficult to communicate complex information by phone or e-mail than it is in person. Even video conferencing has its limitations. For example, consider the experience of going to a college football game or hearing



an orchestra perform a symphony. Live action includes the sights, smells, sounds, and various intangibles that cannot easily be put into words. Even watching a game or musical performance on TV does not capture all the details of the experience. Listening on the radio or reading a *New York Times* review does even begin to convey the nuances of a

live performance. Likewise, virtual environments are limited in capturing all the detail and “feel” of F2F meetings.

Virtual teams, by nature, tend to be more diverse than F2F teams since they often span multiple geographic locations. Greater geographical distances can translate into differences in regional, national, and organizational cultures. Diversity introduces the potential for increased creativity and problem-solving, but it also creates a context for miscommunication and misunderstanding. Therefore, in addition to the challenges noted above, virtual teams also have to contend with the lack of a common set of assumptions and social norms that facilitate effective communication (Hinds & Weisband, 2003). Members may not even be communicating in their native language. Yet even with a common language, different words and phrases have different meanings from culture to culture. It is easy to see that the potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding is great.

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

In many team discussions, there is too much talking and not enough listening. To test this hypothesis, try monitoring your next interaction with friends, family, or colleagues. People are often more interested in delivering a message than receiving one. This is certainly true in meetings where emotions are running high. What happened the last time you had a disagreement with someone or were in a tense or stressful situation? Why did your voice rise in volume and pitch? Why did your words hasten? It was probably because you wanted to make sure you got your point across before it was too late. This chapter emphasizes the fact that communication is critical when it comes to leading people, working in teams, and facilitating interpersonal dynamics.

Team leaders can model active listening and manage the dialogue so that understanding takes place and everyone feels heard. It is amazing how much can be accomplished when members are invited to participate and feel validated when they do so. Because leaders want to encourage a high standard on clear, concise, and well-supported dialogue, they might need to push members to explain their position and to develop their ideas more completely. While leaders will have their own position on various subjects, they should not discount the value of open dialogue or minimize the contributions of others. Effective communication involves members verbalizing their ideas clearly *and* listening carefully to the ideas of others in order to create a fertile environment for understanding, exploration, and innovation.

So, the next time members are locking horns with one another, try using an engaged posture, probing questions, and paraphrases to help them explain their perspectives and arrive at a mutual understanding. Once all the information is on the table and understood by the team, members will be closer than they originally thought. This nuanced and challenging skill set can be difficult to master, but with conscientious practice and risk-taking, it can be learned. And there is no better time or place to hone one's communication skills than when working on a team.