

PART II



Interaction Skills



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Confidence in Groups

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GROUP AND MEMBER CONFIDENCE

Regardless of what you know, think, experience, or need, your level of confidence has a direct effect on both the amount of talking you do in a group and the usefulness of that talk. Members who lack confidence are less likely to share what they know or voice their opinions. Confidence is often the major factor that separates effective group members from those who have difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities. If you feel good about yourself, you can enter a group discussion with confidence and confront controversial issues with competence and conviction.

Most of us see ourselves as bright and hard-working team players. At the same time, all of us have occasional doubts. We know people who seem smarter or more interesting than we are. We've seen natural leaders take over groups with assurance. Given that becoming a leader often depends on talking early and often as well as on expressing an opinion in the face of disagreement, members who are sure of themselves are more likely to emerge as leaders.¹

Confident groups are more likely to succeed. They cope with unexpected events, problematic people, and challenging assignments effectively because their members have a positive, "can do" attitude. Fostering group and member confidence is much more than the power of positive thinking—it helps groups commit to ambitious goals and believe in their ability to succeed.² In this chapter, we look at the ways in which communication apprehension and assertiveness affect member and group confidence.



COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

The anxiety that we sometimes experience when speaking to others is referred to by many names: stage fright, speech anxiety, and communication apprehension. James C. McCroskey and his colleagues have investigated the anxieties that people feel when they are asked to speak to others in a variety of contexts. The result of this study is a large body of research that has important implications for working in groups.

James McCroskey defines **communication apprehension** as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons."³ About 20 percent of the general population experiences very high levels of communication apprehension. About 75 to 85 percent of the U.S. population experiences apprehension when faced with the prospect of making a presentation.⁴ For several decades, researchers noted that when asked about "common" anxieties such as fear of snakes, death, and heights, Americans report that they are more afraid of public speaking than of anything else.⁵ More recently, a Gallup Poll found that fear of public speaking is now second to fear of snakes.⁶ However, communication apprehension includes more

How does this photograph reveal the speaker's confidence and control?
 (© Kathy McLaughlin/The Image Works)



than public speaking anxiety; it also encompasses fear of speaking in conversations, meetings, or group settings.

There are different levels of communication apprehension, depending on several factors, such as the personality of the speaker, the nature of the audience, and the characteristics of the occasion or setting. In other words, a person may have no fears when talking to a friend or colleagues, but may experience high levels of anxiety when asked to address a group of strangers in a large auditorium. Talking at a weekly staff meeting may be easy, but defending a department's actions at a meeting of company executives may generate high levels of anxiety.

Sources of Anxiety

There are many sources of communication apprehension. Heredity, biology, family background, stressful life events, and personal beliefs are just a few of the factors that may contribute to an individual's level of anxiety.⁷ For instance, research indicates that in certain families, communication patterns are associated with the development of communication apprehension.⁸ Children from families in which communication is met with criticism, rejection, or simply a lack of supportiveness are more likely to become apprehensive communicators. "Parents in such families are less open about their emotions and less likely to encourage their children to express their own feelings."⁹ On the other hand, if our families encourage conversation and the expression of ideas, we may experience lower levels of communication apprehension.

Communication apprehension is associated with certain personality traits. In Chapter 3, "Group Member Diversity," we examine the differences between

extroverts and introverts. Extroverts tend to be more outgoing and talkative group members, whereas introverts often prefer to work alone rather than in groups. Not surprisingly, many introverts experience higher levels of communication apprehension than extroverts do. As we note in Chapter 3, some introverts find it difficult to be articulate during a group discussion and experience what Dr. Marti Laney refers to as brainlock.¹⁰ During group conflict or a lively discussion, an apprehensive introvert may become overstimulated and struggle to find the right words to express an idea or opinion. It is important to keep in mind, however, that not all introverts experience high levels of communication apprehension, and not all extroverts are confident group members.

Negative past experiences in groups or unfamiliar situations may also produce communication apprehension. Some members experience **grouphate**—an intense aversion to working in groups—which is often the result of poor group communication skills.¹¹ An individual who lacks the skills to function as a competent and effective group member may dread group meetings and discussions. Grouphate also results from negative past experiences. Unfortunately, you may have been part of groups that were unproductive, wasted time, managed conflict poorly, or had members that derailed the group's efforts. These poor group experiences create negative attitudes and beliefs about the value of working in groups. Fortunately, learning effective group communication skills can improve your group experiences and minimize feelings of anxiety and grouphate.

Communication apprehension often occurs when we work in unfamiliar circumstances or with unfamiliar people. For example, some level of apprehension is natural when you are joining an already established group and you are unfamiliar with the group's norms, members' roles, or status differences within the group. Communication apprehension may also increase when you are working with group members from different cultures. The less you are aware of and understand other members' cultures, the more communication apprehension you may experience while working in groups.¹² Becoming more aware of other members' cultures can increase your confidence when working with diverse group members.

The causes and sources of anxiety are complex. Rarely will a single negative experience result in significant levels of communication apprehension. However, a number of negative experiences can perpetuate communication apprehension and result in physical tension, irrational beliefs about yourself and others, negative self-talk, and avoidance of fearful situations.¹³ This chapter provides several strategies that can help you manage communication apprehension, regardless of its source.

Apprehension in Groups

James McCroskey and Virginia Richmond write that “it is not an exaggeration to suggest that CA [Communication Apprehension] may be the single most important factor in predicting communication behavior in a small group.”¹⁴ Consequently, it is not surprising that highly apprehensive people may avoid small group communication or sit quietly in a group if they must be present.¹⁵ Interestingly,

both low and high apprehensives seem to have an innate ability to figure out where to sit in a small-group setting in order to either facilitate or avoid communication. For example, highly apprehensive group members with a low willingness to communicate often choose seats that inhibit communication and denote low status and power.¹⁶ Figure 4.1 lists some of the basic characteristics of high and low apprehensives in groups. And, as you will read in the following section, communication apprehension has significant effects on the amount of talk, the content of communication, and the resulting perceptions of other group members.

Quantity of Talk. If you are fearful about doing something, you probably will avoid that experience. In groups, anxious members are less likely to talk than confident members. Very often, highly apprehensive members will talk only when called upon. When they must speak, they say less or answer questions by agreeing rather than by voicing their concerns and opinions. Moreover, members who speak infrequently tend to perceive the group and its processes negatively.¹⁷

Quality of Talk. If you are fearful about communicating, a lot of your attention and energy will be focused on how you feel rather than on what you say. When highly apprehensive participants are required to talk, their speech is often awkward. Sentences may be loaded with filler phrases such as “you know,” “well, uh,” “like,” and “okay.” The tone of voice may communicate distress or may be mistaken for disinterest.

Equally significant, apprehensive group members may talk about things that have little to do with the topic being discussed. They are so focused on their internal feelings that they may be unaware of the direction or focus of the discussion. There is also a tendency for apprehensive speakers to avoid disagreement or

FIGURE 4.1 Effects of Communication Apprehension in Groups

High Apprehensives May...	Low Apprehensives May...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoid group participation. • talk less often. • simply agree with others. • smile or giggle inappropriately. • fidget. • use awkward phrases and fillers, e.g. “well, uh.” • have difficulty focusing on the discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiate the discussion. • speak more often. • assert themselves. • become group leaders. • strategically choose when to remain silent. • appear more competent. • dominate a discussion or talk compulsively.

TOOLBOX 4.1



Don't Be a Compulsive Talker

Group members who talk too much can be just as much of a problem as members who don't speak up during a discussion. Compulsive talkers tend to dominate a discussion, speak more frequently than others, feel less inhibited, and experience lower levels of communication apprehension.¹ Compulsive talkers focus on expressing their own ideas and fail to listen to what others have to say. Unfortunately, compulsive talkers are often unaware that their behavior is a problem. If you answer *yes* to several of the following questions, you may be a compulsive talker.² Do you . . .

- Speak significantly more than other group members?
- Direct the course of a group's discussion?
- Immediately take charge of a group?

- Forcefully express opinions on even minor issues?
- Speak for long periods of time without pausing?

A compulsive talker can frustrate group members who never get a chance to express or respond to ideas during a discussion. One way to rein in a compulsive talker is to set ground rules or time limits for discussion. For example, "In order for us all to have a say, let's limit our comments on this issue to two minutes each." In other instances, it may simply be necessary to interrupt: "Sean, I appreciate your comments, but I would like to hear what others have to say on the matter."

¹ Robert N. Bostrom and Nancy Grant Harrington, "An Exploratory Investigation of Characteristics of Compulsive Talkers," *Communication Education*, 48 (1999), pp. 73–80.

² Bostrom and Harrington, p. 76.

conflict. They may go along with the majority, whether they agree or not. Expressing disagreement is too risky. Someone might challenge their position or, even worse, ask them to explain or justify their disagreement. For a highly apprehensive group member, it's much easier to become a silent member of the majority.

Perception of Others. As a result of talking less, apprehensive group members are viewed as less confident, less assertive, and even less responsible. Furthermore, members who speak more are often better liked than those who speak infrequently.¹⁸ Given that leadership is often granted to members who talk early and often, rarely will a reluctant communicator be seen as a potential leader.

As real as communication apprehension is, it is not an insurmountable obstacle. Highly apprehensive speakers do not wear signs declaring their lack of confidence. Neither are they less intelligent, less hard working, or less competent than their more confident colleagues.

Whether your score on the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) at the end of this chapter is high or low, there are ways to improve your level of communication confidence. As you consider your scores on the PRCA, keep in mind that it is impossible to predict what is going to happen in a group solely on the basis of members' communication apprehension scores. Even though someone is anxious, she or he may still speak or express an opinion. On

the other hand, the fact that someone is a confident speaker doesn't necessarily mean that this person is the group's natural leader. Stereotyping group members on the basis of their feelings about communicating will not help your group become more productive.



STRATEGIES FOR HIGH APPREHENSIVES

If your PRCA score classifies you as an apprehensive speaker or if you believe that your level of anxiety associated with talking in groups is unusually high, the following four strategies (see Figure 4.2) may help you reduce your level of fear:

- Realize that you are not alone.
- Learn communication skills.
- Be well prepared.
- Re-lax; re-think; re-vision.

You Are Not Alone

Everyone has experienced communication apprehension in certain settings. According to Richmond and McCroskey, “almost 95 percent of the population reports being scared about communicating with a person or group at some point in their lives.”¹⁹ If you dread the thought of communicating in a group or public setting, you are one of millions of people who feel the same way. Such feelings are normal. As you listen to other group members, don't assume that it is easy for them to talk. Several of them are probably experiencing the same level of fear and anxiety that you are.

TOOLBOX 4.2



Complete the PRCA

At the end of this chapter, there is a self-test called the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, or PRCA. You might want to complete this questionnaire and follow the scoring instructions before reading the rest of this section. Your PRCA scores, particularly those related to groups and meetings, will help you understand how communication apprehension can affect your participation in group discussions.

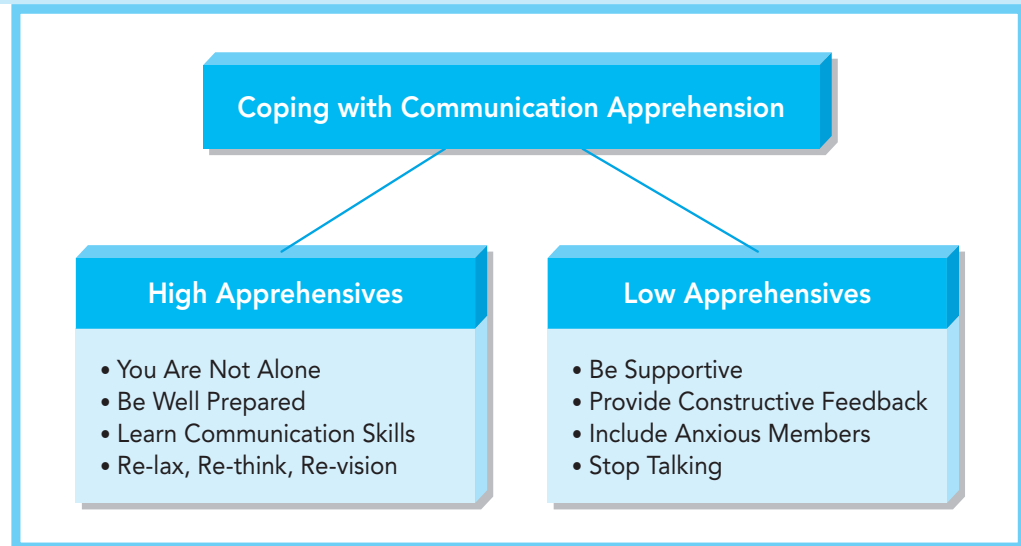
According to James C. McCroskey, the principal researcher and creator of the Personal

Report of Communication Apprehension instrument, the PRCA is the best available measure of traitlike communication apprehension; that is, it measures relatively enduring, personality-type orientations toward a given mode of communication across a wide variety of contexts.¹ In other words, your PRCA score is a relatively permanent trait that is unlikely to change unless there is some type of effective intervention or training.

¹ Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey, *Communication: Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness*, 4th ed. (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch, Scarisbrick, 1995), p. 43.

FIGURE 4.2

Coping with Communication Apprehension



Be Well Prepared

Although you cannot totally eliminate communication apprehension, you can and should be well prepared for every group discussion. Being prepared can reduce your anxiety about participating. Many successful group members who also experience high levels of communication apprehension spend extra time making sure that they have prepared themselves for the topics scheduled for discussion. Well-prepared members know more about the topic and have a clear idea of the positions that they support. As a result, they are more confident when they are asked to participate. Being well prepared will not completely eliminate anxiety, but it can reduce a member's fear that he or she will be at a loss for relevant ideas and information when asked to contribute to the group discussion.

Learn Communication Skills

If you were trying to improve your tennis game, you would try to improve specific skills—perhaps your serve, your return, or your backhand shot. The same is true about communicating in groups. There are specific and learnable communication skills that can help you improve your ability to participate in groups. These skills are described throughout this textbook. Learning skills related to becoming sensitive to feedback, following a group's agenda, or serving as an effective group leader and participant can give you the tools you need to succeed in a group discussion. Improving your communication skills will not erase communication apprehension, but it can reduce your level of anxiety. So instead of telling yourself, "I can't participate; I'm not a skilled communicator," try telling yourself, "I'm learning."²⁰

TOOLBOX 4.3



Confide in a Friend¹

It's easy to believe that your anxiety is worse than anyone else's until you begin talking about it. When you discuss your fears with others, you may discover that you are not alone. Even the most confident-looking group members can have moments of self-doubt and even panic. Sharing your anxieties can also help you substitute positive thoughts for negative ones. If you tell another group member that you feel frustrated at not being able to express your ideas clearly, that person may assure you that he or she understood exactly what you meant.

Discussing your fears with another trusted group member can help correct misperceptions

you may have about your own interaction in a group. If you tell a friend or your instructor that you stumble over words or that your voice shakes during a heated discussion, you may discover that that person has never noticed it. What seems inarticulate to you may be perceived by others as a natural pause. Furthermore, once you share your anxieties, a good group member can help ease your tension, be more supportive, and provide opportunities for you to participate in the group's meetings or discussions.

¹ Based on material previously published in Isa Engleberg and John Daly, *Presentations in Everyday Life: Strategies for Effective Speaking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 70–71.

Re-lax, Re-think, and Re-vision

Of all the methods for reducing communication apprehension, most communication researchers believe that combining physical relaxation with a positive mental attitude is the most effective strategy. The techniques for achieving these dual goals have a variety of names, such as *cognitive restructuring*, *visualization*, and *systematic desensitization*.²¹

Physical Relaxation. One reason we experience communication apprehension is that our bodies feel tense. Our hearts beat faster, our hands shake, and we're short of breath. This response is a natural one and may reflect excitement and eagerness as much as anxiety and fear. By learning to relax your body, you may also reduce your level of communication apprehension. For example, break the word *relax* into two syllables: *re* and *lax*. Inhale slowly through your nose while saying the sound *re* ("ree") silently to yourself. Then breathe out slowly while thinking of the sound *lax* ("laks"). Inhale and exhale three or four times while thinking, "Reee-laaax." By the time you finish, your pulse should be slower, and, hopefully, you will also feel calmer.²² Applying relaxation and meditation techniques can be the first step in reducing communication apprehension.

Cognitive Restructuring. You may be able to reduce apprehension by changing the way you *think* about communicating. Rather than thinking, "They won't listen to me," try thinking, "Because I'm so well prepared, I'll make a valuable

contribution.” **Cognitive restructuring** assumes that communication anxiety is caused by worrisome, irrational, and nonproductive thoughts about speaking to and with others (cognitions) that need modifying (restructuring).²³ Researchers who study emotions contend that thinking happy or sad thoughts can make you *feel* happy or sad.²⁴ So think confident thoughts and feel confident! Next time you feel anxious, try telling yourself these positive statements: “My ideas are important.” “I am well prepared.” “Nervousness just gives me extra energy.”²⁵

Visualization. Closely related to cognitive restructuring is **visualization**, a technique that encourages you to think positively about communicating in groups. Many professional athletes use visualization to improve their performance. They are told to find a quiet place where they can relax and visualize themselves competing and winning.²⁶ You can do the same thing. Take time—*before* you meet with your group—to visualize yourself communicating effectively. Mentally practice the skills you need in order to succeed while also building a positive image of your effectiveness. When you can visualize or imagine yourself succeeding in a group and you can maintain a relaxed state at the same time, you will have broken your fearful response to communicating in groups.

Systematic Desensitization. The technique called **systematic desensitization** recognizes that we often associate fear with certain things or situations, such as snakes, heights, and speaking in groups. One way to break this fearful reaction is to learn a new, relaxed response to the same situation. You begin by learning to achieve deep muscle relaxation. In this relaxed state, you imagine yourself in a variety of communication situations, beginning with those that are very comfortable for you and going on to those that produce more anxiety. The more anxiety-producing the situation, the higher you are on what is called a desensitization hierarchy.

Toolbox 4.4 presents a hierarchy of anxiety-producing situations. As you practice physical relaxation techniques, visualize yourself behaving confidently and competently in each group situation. The more vividly you are able to imagine yourself as a confident group member, the more your communication apprehension will decrease.²⁷

Everyone experiences communication apprehension differently. Some group members may have frightening mental images of communication. Others may be nervous because they lack effective communication skills. Even members who have a positive attitude and effective communication skills may nonetheless experience the physical symptoms of anxiety. Thus, it makes sense to choose a coping strategy based on the way in which you experience communication apprehension. For instance, focus on visualization techniques if negative mental images interfere with your confidence. Figure 4.3 matches coping strategies to six dimensions of apprehension.

TOOLBOX 4.4



Practice Systematic Desensitization

Relax your body and think about the first situation in the following list. In all likelihood, you won't experience the symptoms of nervousness. Even anxious group members generally feel comfortable thinking about the first few items in this hierarchy of experiences. As the list progresses, however, the situations become more anxiety-producing. By trying to relax when visualizing these situations, you can slowly learn to associate these communication experiences with relaxation rather than with nervousness.

1. You are having a casual conversation with a group member before a meeting.
2. Your group is scheduled to meet tomorrow, and you have not had time to prepare.
3. You are introducing yourself to a group in which you are the only new member.
4. Group members are taking turns presenting their opinions on an issue. Your turn is next.
5. You are trying to make a point in a group discussion, and you feel that everyone is looking at you.
6. Another group member has just asked you a difficult question.
7. The group's leader has unexpectedly called on you to present some information.
8. You have raised a controversial issue, and members have begun arguing.
9. You have been appointed the chairperson of a meeting.
10. You are a member of a group doing a panel presentation for a large audience.



STRATEGIES FOR LOW APPREHENSIVES

If your PRCA score classifies you as a low apprehensive, you may be able to help group members whose anxieties hinder their ability to participate in a group discussion. The following four strategies may reduce other members' level of communication apprehension:

- Be supportive.
- Provide constructive feedback.
- Include anxious members.
- Stop talking.

Be Supportive

Members who experience very little communication anxiety should be patient with and supportive of those who lack confidence. For those who are fearless in groups, it is fairly easy to interrupt a speaker or make a point in a strong, confident voice. Such interruptions may devastate a reluctant group member who is struggling to participate but is overlooked by more assertive members. Without support and encouragement, "even seasoned team members may never develop the confidence required to make their views known."²⁸

FIGURE 4.3 Match the Symptom to the Strategy

Dimensions of Apprehension	Coping Strategies
Behavior: Inappropriate behavior or lack of skills	Learn communication skills. Be well prepared.
Affect: Negative emotions, moods, and feelings	Use systematic desensitization to relax when thinking about anxiety-producing situations.
Sensation: Negative or nervous bodily sensations	Practice relaxation and breathing techniques.
Imagery: Negative mental images	Practice visualization.
Cognition: Negative attitudes and opinions or irrational beliefs	Use cognitive restructuring to rethink and change your attitudes and beliefs.
Interpersonal Relationships: Lack of social skill or support system	Learn and practice effective communication skills. Confide in a trusted friend or group member.

Source: Based on Karen Kangas Dwyer, "The Multidimensional Model: Teaching Students to Self-Manage High Communication Apprehension by Self-Selecting Treatments," *Communication Education*, 49. (January 2000), pp. 75–76; Also see "A Multidimensional Plan for Conquering Speech Anxiety," in Karen Kangas Dwyer, *Conquer Your Speech Anxiety*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA:Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), pp. 43–46.

Provide Constructive Feedback

All group members work more effectively when they know how to give and interpret constructive feedback. Constructive feedback also boosts members' confidence and reduces communication apprehension. When apprehensive group members speak, you should smile and nod, listen patiently, and not interrupt or let other members interrupt them.

Constructive feedback should identify your feelings, thoughts, and wants: "I'm a little frustrated with this discussion (feeling), because we seem to be avoiding the real issue (thought). Let's talk about what's really hanging us up (want)."²⁹ Expressing feedback constructively can increase your own credibility and other members' confidence, while also moving the group forward. The following guidelines can help you provide constructive feedback that enhances members' confidence, facilitates interpersonal understanding, and improves discussion:

- Focus on the behavior (rather than on the person).
- Describe the behavior (rather than judge it).
- Provide observations (rather than assumptions).

- Choose an appropriate time and place to contribute feedback (rather than ignoring the circumstances).
- Give feedback to help others (rather than to meet your own needs).³⁰

Include Anxious Members

Patience and understanding alone may not be enough to encourage a member who is too frightened to join in a discussion. Members who experience low levels of communication apprehension should try to include their nervous colleagues. Quiet members often have important information and good ideas. Encouraging anxious members to speak up contributes to the group's overall success.³¹ There are, however, both effective and counterproductive ways to include someone. Confronting a reluctant speaker with a direct challenge, such as “Why in the world do you disagree with the rest of us?” is not very helpful. Asking a question that you know the apprehensive person is able to answer and taking turns speaking are much more effective ways to include all members.

Stop Talking

Finally, the most obvious thing you can do to help those who have difficulty participating is to stop talking. If you know that other members have difficulty entering the discussion or interrupting someone who is speaking, try to curb your own comments so that others have a chance to contribute. It is helpful to keep a careful eye on less-than-confident participants. Often you will see members take a breath as though they want to speak, only to be stifled by your continued comments or by the comments of others. When that happens, conclude your remarks and turn to the person who was trying to contribute in order to give that person an opportunity to speak.

ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness—speaking up and acting in your own best interests without denying the rights and interests of others³²—has the potential to enhance the confidence and effectiveness of a group and its members. When expressed appropriately, assertive communication can raise your level of confidence and reduce communication apprehension.

Assertiveness seeks balance between passivity and aggression, and it applies to both groups and their members. Assertive group members have characteristics and skills that give them the confidence to stand up for themselves while interacting with others to achieve a group goal. Assertive group members tend to

- Appear confident, honest, open, and cooperative.
- Volunteer their ideas and opinions.

GROUPTECH



Confidence in Virtual Groups

When groups engage in teleconferences, videoconferences, and online or computer-mediated discussions, members' confidence may erode or improve, depending on the electronic medium used and the personal preferences of members. Three factors can contribute to the erosion of confidence:

- Communication apprehension
- Writing apprehension
- Computer apprehension

In a videoconference, members who experience high levels of communication apprehension may find themselves more nervous because they are “on television.” Every word and movement is captured for all to see and hear. When a conference moves online, two other kinds of anxiety come into play. The first is writing apprehension.¹ Because online interaction depends on *written* words, poor writers and those who experience writing apprehension find themselves anxious about and preoccupied with the task of writing rather than being focused on the group's goal.

Computer anxiety—a condition affecting as many as 55 percent of all Americans—can complicate matters even further when members have negative attitudes about computers or express doubts about their technological skills. Fortunately, researchers have found that the more experience people have with computers, the less anxious they are.² The solution? Help anxious members in your group acquire and master computer skills, and their anxiety is likely to decrease.

There is, however, a flip side to the confidence coin when it's applied to online conferences and computer-mediated discussions. Some people are *more* confident when communicating via computer. A theory called **hyperpersonal communication** explains why some group members

express themselves more competently and confidently in mediated settings than they do in face-to-face discussions.³ One reason is that you have greater control over how you present yourself online. An added confidence booster is the fact that your written message is separate from your appearance, your gender and race, your status, and your accent or dialect. None of these nonverbal factors are displayed in your message unless you choose to include remarks about them. A second reason some participants prefer online communication is that other group members may overestimate the qualities of a member's online conversation. We tend to like cooperative and responsive online partners, and there's nothing comparable to being liked to boost one's confidence. A third reason is that the online channel allows members to take the time to construct suitable replies. For example, depending on how soon you have been asked to reply to a question, you can consult a report or do research and come off sounding like an expert. Finally, online communication usually provides you with feedback and lets you know whether your message was received and interpreted as you intended. Confirming feedback reinforces confidence.

¹ Andrew F. Wood and Matthew J. Smith, *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, and Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2001), p. 15. For more information about writing apprehension, see Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey, *Communication: Apprehension, Avoidance, and Effectiveness*, 4th ed. (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch, Scarisbrick, 1995).

² Craig R. Scott and Steven C. Rockwell, “The Effect of Communication, Writing, and Technology Apprehension on Likelihood to Use New Communication Technologies,” *Communication Education*, 46 (1997), pp. 29–43.

³ Wood and Smith, p. 80.

⁴ Wood and Smith, p. 81. Also see Andrew F. Wood and Matthew J. Smith, *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005), pp. 88–90.



How can assertiveness help group members achieve a common goal?
 (© Bob Daemrich/The Image Works)

- Ask and answer questions without fear or hostility.
- Stand up for their beliefs, even when others disagree.
- Express their feelings openly.
- Respect and defend the rights and opinions of other group members.

Assertive members may choose to behave passively when an issue is unimportant or when the cost of getting their way is too high to achieve any benefits. In other situations, assertive members may express themselves aggressively when an issue is very important and the benefits of achieving a particular goal outweigh the cost of interpersonal conflict. Such members seek a golden mean between the dialectic tensions of passivity and aggression.

Balancing Passivity and Aggression

Passive group members often lack confidence. They are reluctant to express their opinions and feelings, may experience high levels of communication apprehension, fear criticism from others, and do what they're told to do, even when they disagree with or dislike the order. Passive group members are rarely satisfied with their group experiences because they feel powerless and put-upon.

Entire groups may behave passively. They may be stuck in primary tension or be unwilling to make decisions and take risks. Nonassertive groups may spend hours meeting and talking but fail to resolve an issue or achieve a goal. Members go through the motions of working in groups, but have little faith in themselves as a productive team.

Aggressive members act in their own self-interest at the expense of others. They are critical, insensitive, combative, and even abusive. They get what they want by taking over or by bullying other members into submission. As a consequence, they are often disliked and disrespected. In many cases, aggressive members behave this way because they don't know how to express themselves assertively. As is the case with passivity, entire groups may behave aggressively. In competitive situations, an aggressive reputation—whether real or pretended—may be an asset. Professional sports teams often benefit from an aggressive image. Sales teams may intimidate competitors by appearing aggressive. For most groups, however, aggression breeds resentment and defensiveness in others. Highly aggressive teams may not achieve their goal, for no other reason than that important nonteam members dislike them and obstruct their progress.

ETHICAL GROUPS



The Ethics of Assertiveness

Psychologists Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons call attention to the fact that the principle of assertive action is embedded in our culture and even addressed in the U.S. Constitution.¹ Americans enjoy the constitutional rights of free speech, free press, and the right to peaceably assemble in the furtherance of asserting their convictions. Assertive communication is often culturally accepted, but in some instances it may also be ethically expected.

The National Communication Association's Credo for Ethical Communication calls for a commitment to the "courageous expression of personal conviction in pursuit of fairness and justice."² Ethical communicators have an obligation to assert themselves, not only to pursue their own goals, but to prevent unjust or unethical group action. For instance, members of a medical team must have the courage to speak up if they believe that a patient is being given the wrong medication. Whistle-blowers must have the courage to

report unethical or illegal corporate actions. Whether your group is deciding how to trim a budget, determining the best candidate to hire, or developing a marketing campaign, each group member has an ethical responsibility to act assertively in expressing opposition to group decisions that are potentially unethical.

Being assertive requires a willingness to speak out even in the face of other group members' disapproval or hostility. It requires candid expressions of opinion when facing difficult group decisions. Psychotherapist and best-selling author Nathaniel Branden contends that "to practice self-assertiveness is to live authentically, to speak and act from [your] innermost convictions and feelings."³

¹ Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons, *Your Perfect Right*, 8th ed. (Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2001), p. 222.

² The complete credo is available on the National Communication Association web site at www.natcom.org/policies/External/EthicalComm.htm.

³ Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* (New York: Bantam, 1995), p. 119.

In some cases, passivity and aggression combine to create a third type of behavior—**passive-aggressive**. Passive-aggressives rarely exhibit aggressive behavior, even though they have little or no respect for the rights of others. They also may appear confident rather than passive because they speak up and contribute. However, beneath the façade of effective participation lies an insecure member. Passive-aggressives often get their way by undermining other members behind their backs, by behaving cooperatively but rarely following through with promised contributions, and by appearing to agree while privately planning an opposite action.

Occasionally, confident group members may exhibit passive, aggressive, or passive-aggressive behavior in frustrating situations. For the most part, however, confident group members have acquired assertiveness skills as a way of at least *appearing* confident. Assertive members are trusted because they do not violate the rights and interests of others. Instead, they establish strong interpersonal relationships with other group members. Assertive members speak up and help a

group make decisions and solve problems. They enjoy working in groups and take great satisfaction in achieving a group goal.

The graph pictured in Figure 4.4 demonstrates how group or member assertiveness represents a balance between passivity and aggression.³³ Group or member effectiveness increases as you move from passivity to assertiveness and then decreases as you move beyond assertiveness into aggressiveness.

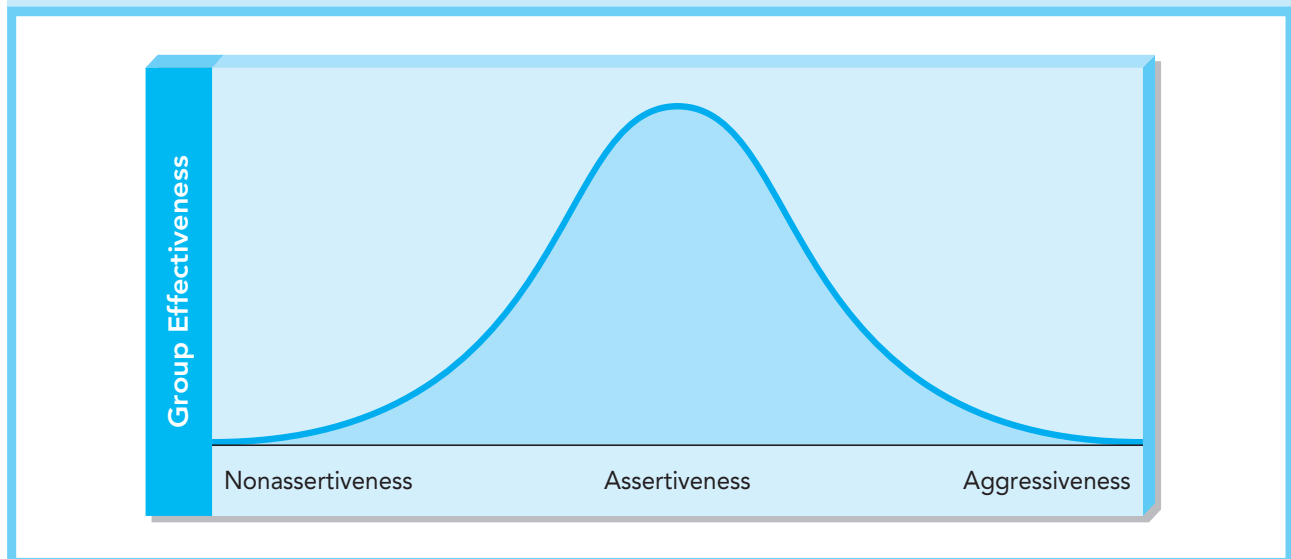
Assertiveness and Diversity

What is appropriate assertive behavior may differ depending on the situation you are in and the people with whom you are communicating. For example, in many Asian cultures, politeness is a key virtue, and communication is indirect in order to avoid confrontation or offense. “Assertiveness, in the Western sense of direct self-expression, is generally not considered appropriate” by those who value a less direct communication style.³⁴ As in all group communication situations, you must take into account the values, backgrounds, and experiences of other communicators.

Gender can also affect a member’s ability to communicate assertively. According to **Muted Group Theory**, many women are less comfortable expressing themselves assertively, particularly in group and public settings.³⁵ For some women, assertive language seems inconsiderate and harsh. As a result, some female members may become a muted group. This muted group phenomenon even occurs in virtual groups. For example, female faculty members are rarely included in developing technology policy on college campuses, and masculine values and interests are still predominant in video games.

Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor at Harvard Business School, believes that fear of speaking in groups prevents many women from being leaders. She

FIGURE 4.4 Effectiveness and Assertiveness



notes that in business classes, “men seem to feel that they can start talking and eventually they’ll have a point to make. The women are slightly more likely to feel that they ought to have something valuable to say before they say it.”³⁶ The lesson for effective group members and would-be leaders is clear—female group members must have enough confidence in themselves and their own ideas and enough courage to speak up during discussions. As when dealing with group members from non-Western cultures, an effective group should understand and adapt to the different ways in which members express their ideas, opinions, and needs.

Assertiveness Skill Building

Regardless of how assertive you think you are, you can always improve your assertiveness skills. Building assertiveness skills incrementally can help you and your group increase in confidence while reducing social tensions. The following list includes both simple and complex skills for enhancing your assertiveness:

- Devote a significant amount of time to preparing for meetings.
- Enlist an assertive colleague who will make sure that you are recognized and given time to speak at meetings.
- Express your opinions clearly. Don’t talk around the issue or ramble.
- Establish and maintain direct eye contact with individual group members.
- Assume an assertive body posture. Your body should be alert and focused in the direction of other speakers.
- Express your feelings as well as your thoughts. If you let group members see your emotions, your recommendations may be taken more seriously.
- Speak expressively—use volume, pitch, and rate to help your statements stand out.

Memorizing a list of skills for enhancing your assertiveness is not the same thing as becoming more assertive. As is the case with many communication methods and tools, you must choose the strategy that is best suited to your purpose. In some cases, a simple statement may serve your purpose. In other cases, you will have to describe a situation, share your feelings, and state your intentions. Selecting from among the following four options can ensure that your assertive behaviors are appropriate and effective:³⁷

- Basic assertion
- Empathetic assertion
- Escalating assertion
- Three-part assertion

Basic Assertion. This technique is the simplest and most straightforward way of expressing your beliefs, feelings, or opinions. It usually involves a simple “I want” or “I feel” statement. Examples:

“I feel uncomfortable about asking Deirdre to participate in this discussion.”

“I want us to be more open about our private agendas as we talk about this project.”

Empathetic Assertion. An empathetic assertion conveys your sensitivity to and understanding of another person. It usually contains two parts—a recognition of the other person’s situation or feelings, followed by a statement in which you stand up for your rights. Examples:

“I know you’ve really been busy, but I want to feel that our group is important to you. I want you to make more time for the project.”

TOOLBOX 4.5



Just Say *No*

One of the most basic but difficult assertiveness skills is having the ability and confidence to say *no*. Randy Paterson, author of *The Assertiveness Workbook*, puts it this way: “If you cannot say *no*, you are not in charge of your own life.”¹ Why, then, do so many people believe that if someone asks us to do something, we have to do it? Paterson offers several reasons:

- They won’t accept my *no* and will expect me to do it anyway.
- They won’t accept or like *me* if I say *no*.
- Given our relationship, I don’t have the right or the courage to say *no*.²

Think of it this way. If someone said, “Can I have your car?” you’d say *no*, wouldn’t you? What about, “Would you write this paper and put my name on it?” or “Will you drive me to the gym? I go three times a week.”

Certainly there’s nothing wrong with saying *yes* when the request is reasonable and you want to do it or to help someone. But what if you want to say *no*? Fortunately, there are several communication strategies and skills you can use to say *no*:

- Use assertive body posture. If you say *no* with your words, but signal *maybe* with your body, people will believe that you can be persuaded to do what they want.
- Wait for the question. Don’t say *yes* or *no* until you hear a request. For example, if someone says, “I can’t ask the group to stay late and help me,” don’t say, “I’ll do it for you.”
- Decide on your wording. Use a clear statement, such as “No, I’m not willing to do that,” rather than “Gee, I’m not sure . . . maybe another time.”
- Don’t apologize or make an excuse when it isn’t necessary. Avoid statements such as “I’m sorry but I really can’t . . .” or “I wish I could but . . .”
- Don’t ask permission to say *no*. Avoid saying, “Would it be okay if I didn’t . . . ?” or “Will you be upset if I say *no*?”
- Accept the consequences. Just as you have the right to say *no*, others have the right not to like it.³

¹ Randy J. Paterson, *The Assertiveness Workbook* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2000), p. 149.

² Peterson, p. 150.

³ Peterson, pp. 151–153.

“I appreciate your concern for achieving a unanimous vote. At the same time, I strongly believe that this decision could backfire and cause serious problems in the future.”

Escalating Assertion. When basic and empathetic assertions do not work, or when the other person fails to respond to your basic assertion and continues to violate your rights, consider using an escalating assertion. Gradually escalate the force of your assertion and become increasingly firm. You may even mention some type of resulting action on your part, but only after making several basic assertive statements. Examples:

“If you don’t finish your portion of the project by tomorrow, I’ll be forced to call an emergency group meeting.”

“We spent a lot of time agreeing to complete this project by December 1, but you haven’t begun working on it. Unless I see some action on your part, I will deny your request for personal leave in order to make sure that we complete the project on time.”

Three-Part Assertion. This assertion technique is especially useful for expressing negative feelings and involves the following three-part statement:

1. When you do _____ (describe the behavior).
2. The effects are _____ (describe how the behavior concretely affects you).
3. I’d prefer _____ (describe what you want).

The real focus of a three-part assertion is on the “I feel” and “I want” parts of the statement. When expressing anger, the tendency is to blame the other person, fly off the handle, or get caught up in the emotion. The three-part assertion provides a way of turning your emotional reaction into an assertive statement. Examples:

“When you didn’t give me the data I requested, I couldn’t complete my report on time. I feel hurt, and I’m frustrated. Next time, I’d like you to do what you say you’ll do.”

“When you forgot to forward Bruce’s email to me, I didn’t know that he had canceled the meeting. I’m angry because I wasted my entire morning driving across town, only to find out that there was no meeting. I wish you would be more responsible and conscientious.”

Assertive group members reap many rewards. Generally, they are more satisfied with and proud of the work they do in groups. They are also more likely to become group leaders. Because assertive members respect the rights of others, they are well liked. There is much to be gained from exhibiting assertive behavior in groups, and first among those benefits is increased confidence.



BALANCING ABILITY AND CONFIDENCE

Mature groups have two characteristics—their members are able to *do* the work needed to achieve a goal, and their members are *confident* that they will succeed. When group members are both very capable and very confident, a leader may have little to do other than help the group as it steamrolls its way to a goal.³⁸

When groups are not mature, problems may arise. Group members with outstanding abilities may not interact with other members because they lack confidence or are unwilling to be assertive. Other group members with great confidence and strong opinions may lack the skills needed to help a group achieve its goal.

Successful groups understand that group effectiveness and members' confidence are inseparable and must be balanced. Balancing the quantity and quality of group communication means understanding how confidence affects group interaction. Group leaders and members should try to balance the amount of talk in a group by providing opportunities for quiet members while restraining members who may tend to dominate a discussion. In addition, members should learn to value assertiveness as a means of expressing opinions and feelings. By finding the golden mean between passivity and aggression, assertive members become more productive and confident.

When individual team members are confident, the group as a whole becomes more sure of itself, its goals, and the ability of its members to achieve those goals. Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto believe that this kind of confidence “translates into the ability of a team to be self-correcting in its capacity to adjust to unexpected adversity and emergent challenges.”³⁹ In other words, a confident group is highly adaptive and welcomes challenge.

GROUPWORK

Sorting the Symptoms

Goal: To summarize and understand the symptoms of communication apprehension

Participants: Groups of 5–7 members

Procedure

1. Make a list of the symptoms of communication apprehension (increased heart rate, excessive perspiration, use of filler phrases such as “you know” and “OK”) that *you* experience when speaking to a group or giving a public presentation.
2. Create a master list of symptoms by combining the lists of all group members.
3. Identify the symptoms that are more likely to occur during a group discussion.

4. Discuss the following questions:
- How can the type of group or topic of discussion affect the number and severity of symptoms?
 - Which symptoms can or cannot be seen or heard by other group members?
 - What is the relationship, if any, between the number and type of symptoms and a person's PRCA score for groups, meetings, interpersonal communication, and public speaking?
 - How can you alleviate some of the causes and symptoms of communication apprehension in groups?

GROUPASSESSMENT

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24)

Directions. This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communication with other people. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are undecided, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree. Work quickly; record your first impression.

- _____ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- _____ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- _____ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
- _____ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in a group discussion.
- _____ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- _____ 8. Usually I am calm and relaxed while participating in a meeting.
- _____ 9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
- _____ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- _____ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me feel uncomfortable.
- _____ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
- _____ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
- _____ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- _____ 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- _____ 16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.

- _____ 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- _____ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- _____ 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
- _____ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am giving a speech.
- _____ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- _____ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- _____ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- _____ 24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous that I forget facts I really know.

Scoring: The PRCA permits computation of one total score and four subscores. The subscores are related to communication apprehension in each of four common communication contexts: group discussions, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking. To compute your scores, merely add or subtract your scores for each item as indicated here.

To obtain your total score for the PRCA, simply add your four subscores together. Your score should be between 24 and 120. If your score is below 24 or above 120, you have made a mistake in computing the score. Scores for each of the four contexts (groups, meetings, interpersonal conversations, and public speaking) can range from a low of 6 to a high of 30. Any score above 18 indicates some degree of apprehension. If your score is above 18 for the public speaking context, you are like the overwhelming majority of Americans.

Scoring Formula

Group Discussions: 18 + scores for items 2, 4, and 6; – scores for items 1, 3, and 5.

Meetings: 18 + scores for items 8, 9, and 12; – scores for items 7, 10, and 11.

Interpersonal Conversations: 18 + scores for items 14, 16, and 17; – scores for items 13, 15, and 18.

Public Speaking: 18 + scores for items 19, 21, and 23; – scores for items 20, 22, and 24.

Subscores

- _____ Group Discussions
- _____ Meetings
- _____ Interpersonal Conversations
- _____ Public Speaking

Norms for PRCA-24:

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total Score	65.5	15.3
Group	15.4	4.8
Meetings	16.4	4.8
Interpersonal	14.5	4.2
Public Speaking	19.3	5.1

Source: PRCA-24 reprinted with permission from the author. See James C. McCroskey, *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communication*, 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 37.

NOTES

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