



ETHICAL CHALLENGE

ARE WE OUR BROTHER'S AND SISTER'S KEEPER?

As you read on pages 6-9, we communicate in an attempt to meet our own needs. Sometimes, however, our desires are incompatible with those of others.

Think of three situations from your personal experience where your success appears to be another person's loss. For each of these situations, consider your obligation to communicate in a way that helps the other person reach his or her goals. Is it possible to satisfy your own needs and those of others? If not, how do you reconcile conflicting needs?

✚ THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

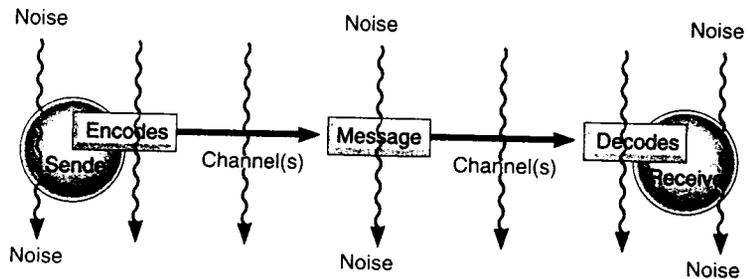
We've been talking about communication as though the actions described by this word were perfectly clear. Before going further we need to explain exactly what happens when people exchange messages with one another. Doing so will introduce you to a common working vocabulary and, at the same time, preview some of the top we'll cover in later chapters.

A LINEAR VIEW

As recently as forty years ago, researchers viewed communication as something one person "does" to another.¹⁸ In this **linear communication model**, communication is like giving an injection: a **sender** **encodes** ideas and feelings into some sort of **message** and then conveys them by means of a **channel** (speech, writing, and so on) into a **receiver**, who **decodes** the message (see Figure 1-1).

This perspective does provide some useful information. For instance, it highlights how different channels can affect the way a receiver responds to a message. Should you say "I love you" in person? Over the phone? By renting space on a billboard? By sending flowers and a card? With a singing telegram? Each channel has its differences.

FIGURE 1-1
Linear communication model



Computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers a good example of how channels affect the way in which people interact. At first, theorists predicted that CMC would be less personal than face-to-face communication. With no nonverbal cues, it seemed that CMC couldn't match the rich interaction that happens in person, or even over the phone. Recent studies, however, have shown that CMC can be just as deep and complex as personal contact.¹⁹

This research supports the suggestion of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Computer, that personal computers be renamed "inter-personal computers."²⁰ Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen describes how the computer-mediated channel of electronic mail (e-mail) transformed the quality of two relationships:

E-mail deepened my friendship with Ralph. Though his office was next to mine, we rarely had extended conversations because he is shy. Face to face he mumbled so, I could barely tell he was speaking. But when we both got on e-mail, I started receiving long, self-revealing messages; we poured our hearts out to each other. A friend discovered that e-mail opened up that kind of communication with her father. He would never talk much on the phone (as her mother would), but they have become close since they both got on line.²¹

The linear model also introduces the concept of **noise**—a term used by social scientists to describe any forces that interfere with effective communication. Noise can occur at every stage of the communication process. Three types of noise can disrupt communication—external, physiological, and psychological. **External noise** (also called "physical") includes those factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, too much cigarette smoke in a crowded room might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person, and sitting in the rear of an auditorium might make a speaker's remarks unclear. External noise can disrupt communication almost anywhere in our model—in the sender, channel, message, or receiver. **Physiological noise** involves biological factors in the receiver or sender that interfere with accurate reception: illness, fatigue, and so on. **Psychological noise** refers to forces within a communicator that interfere with the ability to express or understand a message accurately. For instance, a fisherman might exaggerate the size and number of the fish he caught in order to convince himself and others of his talents. In the same way, a student might become so upset upon learning that she failed a test that she would be unable (perhaps unwilling is a better word) to understand clearly where she went wrong. Psychological noise is such an important communication problem that we have devoted much of Chapter Nine to investigating its most common form, defensiveness.

ACTIVE VIEW

Despite its simplicity, the linear view of communication isn't completely accurate. For one thing, it makes the questionable assumption that all communication involves encoding. We certainly do choose

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symbols to convey most verbal messages. But what about the many nonverbal cues that occur whether or not people speak: facial expressions, gestures, postures, vocal tones, and so on? Cues like these clearly do offer information about others, although they are often unconscious, and thus don't involve encoding. For this reason, it seems more accurate to replace the term *encoding* in our model with the broader label **behavior**, because it describes both deliberate and unintentional actions that can be observed and interpreted.²²

A more obvious problem of the linear model is its suggestion that communication flows in one direction, from sender to receiver. Although some types of messages (printed and broadcast messages, for example) do flow in a one-way, linear manner, most types of communication—especially the interpersonal variety—are two-way exchanges. To put it differently, the linear view ignores the fact that receivers *react* to messages by sending other messages of their own.

Consider, for instance, the significance of a friend's yawn as you describe your romantic problems. Or imagine the blush you may see as you tell one of your raunchier jokes to a new acquaintance. Nonverbal behaviors like these show that most face-to-face communication is a two-way affair. The discernible response of a receiver to a sender's message is called **feedback**. Not all feedback is nonverbal, of course. Sometimes it is oral, as when you ask an instructor questions about an upcoming test or volunteer your opinion of a friend's new haircut. In other cases it is written, as when you answer the questions on a midterm exam or respond to a letter from a friend. Figure 1-2 makes the importance of feedback clear. It shows that most communication is, indeed, a two-way affair in which we both send and receive messages.

The **interactive communication model** in Figure 1-2 also identifies a clue to the cause of many misunderstandings. Although we naively assume that conversational give-and-take will help people understand one another, your personal experience shows that misunderstandings often occur. * Your constructive suggestion is taken as criticism; your friendly joke is taken as an insult; your hints are missed entirely. Such misunderstandings often arise because communicators often occupy different **environments**—fields of experience that help them understand others' behavior. In communication terminology, environment refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation.

Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments:

- A might belong to one ethnic group and B to another;
- A might be rich and B poor;
- A might be rushed and B have nowhere to go;
- A might have lived a long, eventful life and B might be young and inexperienced;
- A might be passionately concerned with the subject and B indifferent to it.

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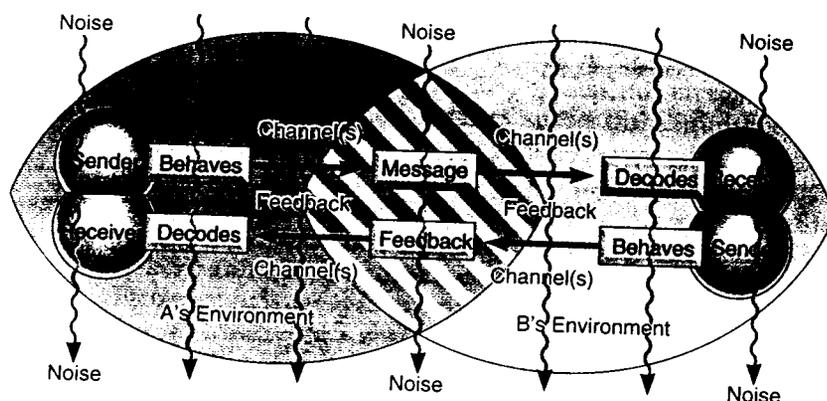


FIGURE 1-2
Interactive communication
model

Environments aren't always obvious. For example, a recent study revealed that college students who have been enrolled in debate classes become more argumentative and verbally aggressive than those who have not been exposed to this environment.²³

Notice how the model in Figure 1-2 shows that the environments of A and B overlap. This interesting area represents the background that the communicators must have in common. As the shared environment becomes smaller, communication becomes more difficult. Consider a few examples in which different perspectives can make understanding difficult:

Parents (who have trouble recalling their youth) clash with their children (who have never known and cannot appreciate the responsibility that comes with parenting).

Members of a dominant culture (who have never experienced how it feels to be "different") fail to appreciate the concerns of people from nondominant co-cultures (whose own perspectives make it hard to understand the cultural blindness of the majority).

Professors (who have dedicated their professional lives to studying a topic) have a hard time sympathizing with the limited motivation and understanding of some students (whose personal lives and priorities make academic success a relatively low priority).

Differing environments make understanding difficult, but certainly not impossible. Hard work and many of the skills described in this book provide ways to bridge the gap that separates all of us to a greater or lesser degree. For now, recognizing the challenge that comes from dissimilar environments is a good start. You can't solve a problem until you recognize that it exists.

Even with the addition of feedback and environment, the model in Figure 1-2 isn't completely satisfactory. Notice that it portrays communication as a static activity, suggesting that there are discrete "acts" of communication beginning and ending at identifiable times,

*As you will learn in Chapters Five and Eight, clarity is not always the goal when people communicate. We often deliberately try to be vague in order to hide our real feelings and to save others from embarrassment.

Like paths and alleys overgrown with hardy, rank-growing weeds, the words we use are overgrown with our individual, private, provincial associations, which tend to choke the meaning.

Stefan Themerson

and that a sender's message causes some effect in a receiver. Furthermore, it suggests that at any given moment a person is either sending or receiving.

A TRANSACTIONAL VIEW

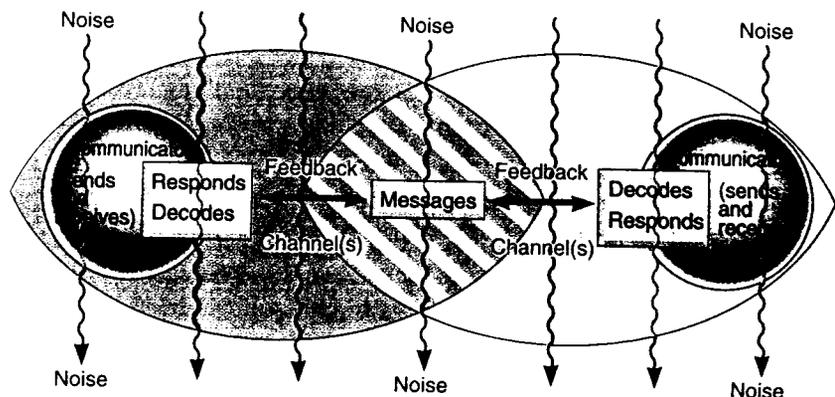
Neither the linear nor the interactive models paints an accurate picture of most types of communication. The activity of communicating is best represented by a **transactional communication model**. There are several ways in which a transactional perspective differs from the more simplistic ones we've already discussed.

First, a transactional model reveals that we usually send and receive messages simultaneously, so that the images of sender and receiver in Figure 1-2 should not be separated as if a person were doing only one or the other, but rather superimposed and redefined as "communicators"²⁴ (see Figure 1-3). At a given moment we are capable of receiving, **decoding**, and responding to another person's behavior, while at the same time that other person is receiving and responding to ours. Consider, for example, what might occur when you and a housemate negotiate how to handle household chores. As soon as you begin to hear (receive) the words sent by your partner "I want to talk about cleaning the kitchen . . .," you grimace and clench your jaw (sending a nonverbal message of your own while receiving the verbal one). This reaction leads your partner to interrupt himself, defensively sending a new message: "Now wait a minute. . . ."

Besides illustrating the simultaneous nature of face-to-face interaction, this example shows that it's difficult to isolate a single discrete "act" of communication from the events that precede and follow it. Your partner's comment about cleaning the kitchen (and the way it was presented) probably grew from exchanges you had in the past. Likewise, the way you'll act toward each other in the future depends on the outcome of this conversation. As communication researcher Steve Duck put it, "Relationships are best conceived . . . as unfinished business."²⁵

What important truths does the transactional model reveal? Put simply, it shows that communication isn't something we do *to*

FIGURE 1-3
Transactional communication model



others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them. In this sense, communication is rather like dancing—at least the kind of dancing we do with partners. Like dancing, communication depends on the involvement of a partner. And like good dancing, successful communication doesn't depend on the skills of just one person. A great dancer who doesn't consider and adapt to the skill level of his or her partner can make both people look bad. In communication and dancing, even two talented partners don't guarantee success. When two skilled dancers perform without coordinating their movements, the results feel bad to the dancers and look foolish to an audience. Finally, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises out of the way in which the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners.

Psychologist Kenneth Gergen captures the transactional nature of communication well when he points out how our success depends on interaction with others: "One cannot be 'attractive' without others who are attracted, a 'leader' without others willing to follow, or a 'loving person' without others to affirm with appreciation."²⁶

The transactional nature of communication shows up dramatically in relationships between parents and their children. We normally think of "good parenting" as a skill that some people possess and others lack. We judge the ability of a mother and father in terms of how well their children turn out. In truth, the question of good parenting isn't quite so clear. Research suggests that the quality of interaction between parents and children is a two-way affair—that children influence parents just as much as the reverse.²⁷ For example, children who engage in what social scientists call "problematic behavior" evoke more high-control responses from their parents than do cooperative children. By contrast, youngsters with mild temperaments are less likely to provoke coercive reactions by their parents than more aggressive children. Parents with low self-esteem tend to send more messages that weaken the self-esteem of their children, who in turn are likely to act in ways that make the parents feel even worse about themselves. Thus, a mutually reinforcing cycle arises in which parents and children shape one another's feelings and behavior. In cases like this it's at least difficult and probably impossible to identify who is the "sender" and who is the "receiver" of messages. It's more accurate to acknowledge that parents and children—just like husbands and wives, bosses and employees, teachers and students, or any other people who communicate with one another—act in ways that mutually influence one another. The transactional nature of relationships is worth re-emphasizing: We don't communicate *to* others, we communicate *with* them.

By now you can see that a transactional model of communication should be more like a motion picture film than a gallery of still photographs. Although Figure 1-3 does a fair job of picturing the phenomenon we call communication, an animated version in which the environments, communicators, and messages constantly change would be an even better way of capturing the process. You can also

 Sometimes she thought the trouble was, she and Leon were too well acquainted. The most innocent remark could call up such a string of associations, so many past slights and insults never quite settled or forgotten, merely smoothed over. They could no longer have a single uncomplicated feeling about one another.

Anne Tyler,
Morgan's Passing

see that communication is not something that people do to one another, but a process in which they create a relationship by interacting *with* each other.

Now we can summarize the definition of communication we have been developing. **Communication** is a *continuous, transactional process* involving participants who occupy different but overlapping *environments* and create a relationship by *simultaneously sending and receiving messages*, many of which are distorted by external, physiological, and psychological noise.



INVITATION TO INSIGHT

A MODEL MUDDLE

You can gain more appreciation for the value of communication models by using the one pictured in Figure 1-3 to analyze a communication problem you recently experienced. Which elements described in the model contributed to the problem? What steps might you and the other person or people involved have taken to overcome these difficulties?

✦ COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Before we look at the qualities that distinguish interpersonal communication, it's important to define what communication is and what it isn't, and to discuss what it can and can't accomplish.

COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

It's possible to draw several important conclusions about communication from what you have already learned in this chapter.

COMMUNICATION CAN BE INTENTIONAL OR UNINTENTIONAL People usually plan their words carefully before they ask the boss for a raise or offer a constructive criticism. Not all communication is so deliberate, however.²⁸ Sooner or later we all carelessly make a comment that would have gone better unsaid. Perhaps you lose your temper and blurt out a remark that you later regret, or maybe your private remarks are overheard by a bystander. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sign of boredom, but others see them regardless.

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO COMMUNICATE Because both deliberate and unintentional behaviors send a message, many theorists agree that it is impossible not to communicate. Whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, act emotional or keep a

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