Basics of Business and Professional Communication

Strategic Case
Sundown Bakery

When Carol Teinchek and Bruce Marshall first started Sundown Bakery, the business was fairly simple. Carol ran the shop up front, while Bruce ran the bakery and ordered supplies. When the business began to grow, Carol hired two part-time clerks to help out in the shop. Marina had moved to the country 2 years ago from El Salvador, and Kim was a newly arrived Korean who was working his way through college. Bruce hired Maurice, a French-Canadian, as an assistant.

The ovens were soon running 24 hours a day, supervised by Maurice, who was now master baker, and two assistants on each of three shifts. Marina and Kim supervised the shop, since Carol was usually too busy managing general sales distribution to spend much time with customers. Bruce still spent 3 or 4 hours a day in the bakery whenever he could get out of his office, but spent most of that time coordinating production and solving problems with Maurice.

Within the next year, Sundown expanded from its original location, adding two new shops as well as two kiosks in local malls. Carol and Bruce hired a new operations manager, Hans Mikelson, who had formerly been regional manager of a national chain of coffee shops. Mikelson had plenty of new ideas about how to operate an expanding business: He had a website created, added an extensive range of drinks and meal items to the menu, and instituted two dress codes—one for all counter people and another for kitchen employees. He also put together an employee manual to save time orienting new employees. All of these changes were announced by memos from Mikelson, which were distributed to employees by the store managers.

The expanding size of Sundown led to a change in the company. The family feeling that was strong when Sundown was a small operation was less noticeable. The new employees barely knew Bruce and Carol, and, as a result, there was less give-and-take of ideas between the owners and workers.

Mikelson's memos on the dress code and the employee manual created a crisis. Old-time employees were furious about receiving orders from "the bureaucrats," as management came to be called. Bruce and Carol recognized the problem and wanted to keep the lines of communication open, but weren't sure how to do so. "I'm just a baker," Bruce confessed in exasperation. "I don't know how to run a big company."

Another set of challenges grew out of the changing character of the employees. In the original location alone, Sundown now employed workers from seven different countries. José, who was born in Brazil, confessed to Bruce that he felt uncomfortable being managed by Carol. "It's nothing personal," he said, "but where I come from, a man doesn't take orders from a woman." The Sundown employee profile was different in other ways. Two of the assistant bakers were openly gay; one of the sales clerks got around by wheelchair.

Carol, Bruce, and Hans know that good products alone aren't enough to guarantee the continuing success of Sundown Bakeries. They need to improve the quality of communication among the growing team who make and sell their products.

As you read the chapters in this unit, consider the following questions:

Chapter 1

1. Analyze the likely causes of the resentment over the employee manual and uniforms by considering the impact of the sender, message, decoding, feedback, context, and probable sources of noise. Describe how the problems you identified could have been minimized by different communication strategies.

2. Identify the changes in communication channels used for communication between employees and management as Sundown has grown. What channels can be used to make communication about changes in the business most productive?

3. Consider the relational messages employees seem to have received from management as Sundown's business grew.

4. How have Sundown's formal and informal communication networks changed as the company expanded? In what ways have both the formal and informal networks contributed to Sundown's growing pains? In what ways can these networks be used to improve the relationships between management and employees?

Chapter 2

1. How do changes in the demographic makeup of Sundown Bakeries reflect transformation of the larger workforce? Consider the following dimensions of culture as you describe the impact of culture on communication within the company: high- and low-context styles, individualism and collectivism, and power distance.

2. How would you describe the early organizational culture of Sundown? How has the culture changed as the company grew? Consider the issues listed on pages 64–65 as you answer this question.

3. What advice would you give to Sundown's management team about how to maintain the most effective culture in the face of the company's growth?

1

Communicating at Work

The Importance of Communication

Virtually everyone communicates at work. No matter what the field, and no matter how much you know about your job, specialized knowledge alone isn't enough to guarantee success; communication skills are also vital. Table 1–1 summarizes the results of one survey in which 500 managers in a wide range of industries including retail, manufacturing, service, and finance ranked the importance of various factors in hiring decisions. Oral communication skills topped the list.[1] Other surveys have produced similar results. Additional research validates the importance of communication-related skills including working on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, working with cultural diversity, interviewing, listening, conducting meetings, and resolving conflicts.[2] This fact explains why almost 90 percent of U.S. companies provide some type of communication skills training.[3]

Subscribers to the *Harvard Business Review* rated "the ability to communicate" the most important factor in making an executive "promotable," more important than ambition, education, and capacity for hard work.[4] Research spanning several decades has consistently ranked communication skills as crucial for managers.[5] One 20-year study that followed the progress of Stanford University MBAs revealed that the most successful graduates (as measured by both career advancement and salary) shared personality traits that distinguish good communicators: a desire to persuade, an interest in talking and working with other people, and an outgoing, ascendant personality. As students, these achievers developed their communication skills by choosing courses in areas such as persuasion, selling ideas, negotiation, and other forms of speaking.[6]

Table 1–1
Importance of Competencies in Hiring Decisions

Rank/Order	Factors/Skills Evaluated
1	Oral communication
2	Self-motivation
3	Problem-solving
4	Decision-making
5	Leadership
6	Human relations
7	Teamwork
8	Work experience
9	Time management
10	Personal appearance
11	Written communication
12	Academic performance
13	Creativity
14	Delegation
15	Multilingual ability

Source: Jeanne D. Maes, Teresa G. Weldy, and Marjorie L. Icenogle, "Oral Communication Competency in the Workplace," Journal of Business Communication *34 (January 1997), pp. 67–80.*

The need for communication skills is important in virtually every career, not just those that are traditionally regarded as people-oriented. For example, one study revealed that practitioners in Big Six accounting firms spent 80 percent of their work time communicating with others, individually and in groups.[7] The need for communication skill is just as important in high-tech fields. William Schaffer, international business development manager for Sun Microsystems, made the point emphatically: "If there's one skill that's required for success in this industry, it's communication skills."[8] Other high-tech experts back up this claim. Over 90 percent of the personnel officials at 500 U.S. businesses stated that increased communication skills are needed for success in the 21st century.[9] After studying the needs of four Silicon Valley manufacturing firms, researchers discovered that what employees needed was "oral literacy—the ability to communicate, to work in teams, and to shift rapidly as the work changed."[10]

Most successful people recognize the role communication skills have played in their career. In one survey of over 1,000 adult workers, 87 percent of the respondents rated communication skills as being "very important" for performing their jobs.[11] (This statistic compares with 50 percent who rated computer skills as being "very important.") When college graduates in a wide variety of fields were asked what abilities were vital to their success, most respondents identified communication. In fact, the majority said that communication skills were more important than the major subject they had studied in college.[12] In one survey of business school alumni, oral communi-

cation skills were judged as "mandatory" or "very important" by 100 percent of the respondents—every person who replied.[13]

The importance of communication is not surprising when you consider the staggering amount of time people spend communicating on the job. One study based on responses from over 1,000 employees at Fortune 1000 companies found that workers send and receive an average of 178 messages each day via telephone, e-mail, faxes, pagers, and face-to-face communication.[14] Some experts have estimated that the average business executive spends 75 to 80 percent of the time communicating—about 45 minutes out of every hour.[15]

Businesspeople aren't the only ones whose jobs depend on effective communication. One recent survey of employers who supervise engineering graduates backed up the importance of communication skills. These managers reported that the most valued talents of newly hired graduates included the ability to work well on teams with people outside their specialties.[16] The Los Angeles Police Department cited "bad communication" among the most common reasons for errors in shooting by its officers.[17] After two studies indicated that physicians with poor communication skills are more likely to be sued, an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* called for more communication classes for doctors.[18]

The importance of communicating effectively on the job is clear. But this discussion so far hasn't even addressed the fact that communication skills often make the difference between being hired and being rejected in the first place. When almost 250 employers were asked "What skills are most important for college graduates?" their overwhelming response was oral communication and interpersonal skills, followed by teamwork and analytical abilities.[19] In another survey, 1,000 managers rated the abilities to speak and listen effectively as the two most important factors in helping college graduates find jobs in a competitive workplace, placing them ahead of attributes like technical competence, work experience, and specific degree earned.[20] When 400 employers were asked to identify the top characteristic they seek in job candidates, the leading answer was "communication skills."[21] Finally, when 170 well-known business and industrial firms were asked to list the most common reasons for *not* offering jobs to applicants, the most frequent replies were "inability to communicate" and "poor communication skills."[22]

The Nature of Communication

It is easier to recognize the importance of communication than it is to define the term. A close look at what happens when people try to communicate can offer clues about why some attempts succeed and others fail.

The Process of Communication

No matter what the setting or the number of people involved, all communication consists of a few elements. Although the process of communication is more than the total of these elements, understanding them can help explain what happens when one person tries to express an idea to others.

Sender   The communication process begins with a **sender,** the person who transmits a message—a sales manager making a presentation to a client, a computer programmer explaining a new program to a co-worker, or an after-dinner speaker introducing a guest.

Message

A **message** is any signal that triggers the response of a receiver. Some messages are deliberate, while others (such as sighs and yawns) are unintentional. Messages are not synonymous with meanings. For example, you might remind a co-worker about a deadline with the intention of being helpful, but your colleague could interpret the message as an indication that you were annoyed or mistrustful.

Encoding

The sender must choose certain words or nonverbal methods to send an intentional message. This activity is called **encoding.** The words and channels that a communicator chooses to deliver a message can make a tremendous difference in how that message is received. Consider the simple act of a manager's offering feedback to an employee: Whether the words are respectful or abrupt and whether the message is delivered in person or in a memo can make a big difference in how the feedback is received.

Channel

The **channel** (sometimes called the **medium**) is the method used to deliver a message. As a business communicator, you can often choose whether to put your message in writing as a letter or memo. You can deliver it by hand or send it via regular mail or use an overnight delivery service. You can send a fax or electronic mail. Or you can communicate it orally, either over the phone or in person.

Receiver

A **receiver** is any person who notices and attaches some meaning to a message. In the best of circumstances, a message reaches its intended receiver with no problems. In the confusing and imperfect world of business, however, several problems can occur. The message may never get to the receiver. It might be delivered but lie buried under a mountain of papers on the recipient's desk. If the message is oral, the listener might forget it. Even worse, a message intended for one receiver might be intercepted by another one. A bystander might overhear your critical remarks about a co-worker, or a competitor might see a copy of your correspondence to a customer.

Decoding

Even if a message does get to its intended receiver intact, there is no guarantee that it will be understood as the sender intended it to be. The receiver must still **decode** it, attaching meaning to the words or symbols. As we have already seen, decoding is not always accurate. Your friendly joke might be taken as a deliberate offense, or a suggestion might be misinterpreted as an order. The request for "next year's figures" might mean the next fiscal year, not calendar year. It is a mistake to assume that your messages will always be decoded accurately.

Feedback

Receivers don't just absorb messages like sponges; they respond to them. Consider audience questions during a talk or the way a customer glances at the clock during a sales presentation. Imagine the tone of voice an employer might use while saying, "I'll have to think about your proposal." Behaviors like these show that most communication is a two-way affair. The discernible response of a receiver to a sender's message is called **feedback.** Some feedback is nonverbal—smiles, sighs, and so on. Sometimes it is oral, as when you react to a colleague's ideas with questions or comments. Feedback can also be written, as when you respond to a co-worker's memo. In many cases, *no* message can be a kind of feedback. Failure to answer a letter or to return a phone call can suggest how the noncommunicative person feels about the sender. When we add the element of feedback to our communication model, we begin to recognize that in face-to-face settings people are simultaneously senders and receivers of information. This explains why these two roles are superimposed in the communication model pictured in Figure 1–1.
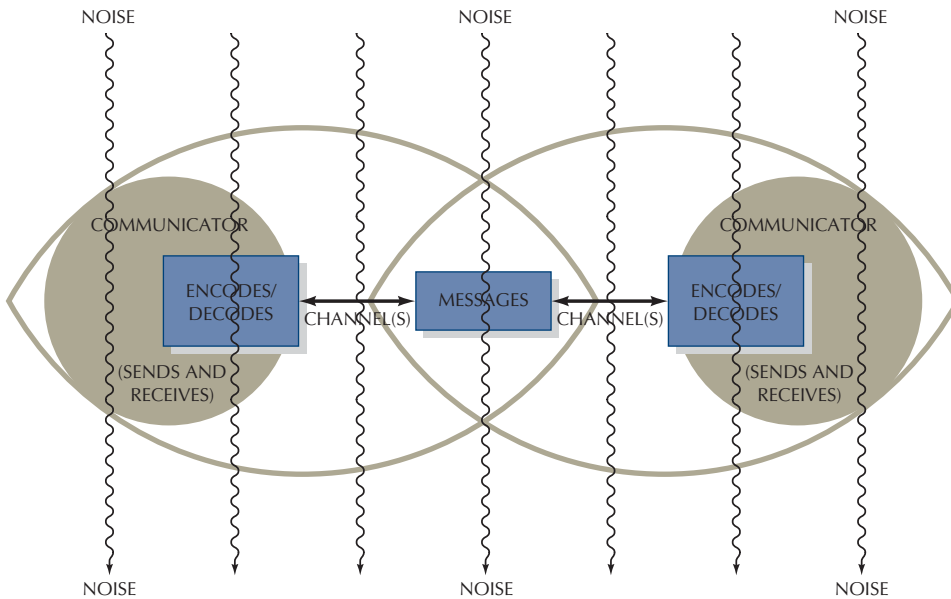
FIGURE 1–1
Communication Model

Noise   It might seem that, with enough feedback, the mental images of sender and re-ceiver will match: the message received will be identical to the message sent. Your own experience probably shows that this doesn't always happen. One of the greatest sources of communication failure is **noise**—the term communication scholars use for factors that interfere with the exchange of messages. The most obvious type of noise is **external noise** (also called **physical noise**). This includes sounds that distract communicators, such as the babble of voices in the next room or the annoying ring of someone's cell phone in a meeting; but there are other types of external noise that don't involve sound. For exam-ple, an overcrowded room or a smelly cigar can disrupt concentration. A second kind of interference is **physiological noise.** Hearing disorders fall into this category, as do ill-nesses and disabilities that make it difficult to send or receive messages. Recall how hard it is to pay attention when you are recovering from a late-night study session or have the flu. The third type of interference is **psychological noise,** that is, forces within the sender or receiver that interfere with understanding. Egotism, defensiveness, hostility, preoccu-pation, fear—all these and more constitute psychological noise.

Context   Communication is influenced by the **context** in which it occurs. There are several dimensions of context, including physical, social, chronological, and cul-tural. We will now take a brief look at each of them.

Communication always takes place in some setting. This **physical context** can in-fluence the content and quality of interaction. For example, imagine how discussing a problem with your boss or asking for a raise might be received differently in each of the following settings:

In your boss's office.

In your work area, with others observing the conversation.

Over lunch at a local restaurant.

At a company picnic or party.

The **social context** refers to the nature of the relationship between the communicators, as well as who is present. Imagine, for instance, the difference in asking a manager for the raise under a variety of different social contexts:

You and the manager have been friends for several years, *or* you and the manager have no personal relationship.

You are the same age as your manager, *or* she or he is 15 years older (or younger) than you.

You and the manager have gotten along well in the past, *or* you have had an ongoing personality conflict with the manager.

You and the manager are alone, *or* your only chance to ask for the raise comes with other employees around.

The **chronological context** refers to the ways in which time influences interaction. A sample of time-related considerations shows the importance of adapting to the chronological context:

What time of day is it (first appointment in the morning or last in the afternoon)?

What are the communicator's personal preferences for time (a morning person or a late starter)?

Is it before, during, or after work hours?

Is this a busy time of year (holiday season, tax time)?

Has there just been a major layoff, downsizing, or profit loss?

You can boost your chances for success by paying attention to chronological factors. When calling someone or requesting a person's help, consider asking, "Is this a good time?" or "Do you have time now, or would another time be more convenient?"

The **cultural context** of communication includes both the organizational and the ethnic and/or national backgrounds of the persons communicating. Chapter 2 discusses the role of culture in detail. For now, you can get a sense of the importance of culture by imagining how just a few differences in backgrounds might influence communication between the following people:

Baby boomers and generation X-ers.

Euro-Americans and Hispanics.

New Yorkers and Californians.

Men and women.

Americans and Japanese.

An interesting application of contextual change occurred during secret negotiations in the 1990s between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization when the hosts, the Norwegian foreign minister and Marianne Heiberg, his wife, changed the context. In their home, away from formal meeting halls, the hosts invited the negotiators to play on the floor with their 4-year-old child. After changing the context, impasses were broken and a Mideast peace accord was hammered out.[23]

Communication Principles

The communication model pictured in Figure 1–1 is not yet complete. It is like a still picture of a live event: all the elements are present except action. Several characteristics describe the dynamic nature of the communication process.

Communication Is Unavoidable A fundamental axiom of communication is "One cannot not communicate." As you will learn in Chapter 3, we send a rich stream of nonverbal messages even when we are silent. Facial expression, posture, gesture, clothing, and a host of other behaviors offer cues about our attitudes. The impossibility of not communicating means that we send messages even by our absence. Failing to show up at an event or leaving the room suggests meanings to others. Because communication is unavoidable, it is essential to consider the unintentional messages you send.

Communication Operates on Two Levels Every time two or more people communicate, they exchange two kinds of messages. The most obvious ones are **content messages**—information about the topic under discussion. But at a less apparent level, the communicators also exchange **relational messages**—signals indicating how they feel about one another.[24] Relational messages indicate a variety of attitudes. An important one is *affinity*—the degree to which a communicator likes the other person in general or a particular message that is being sent. Another kind of relational message

deals with *control*—the amount of influence in that situation. Communication theorists sometimes talk about three self-explanatory distributions of control that can exist between communicators: "one up," "one down," and "straight across." A third type of relational message can reflect a communicator's degree of *respect* for the other person or people. Note that respect and affinity aren't always identical: It is possible to like others without respecting them and to respect them without liking them. In the world of work, respect and liking don't always go hand in hand. As Chapter 3 will explain, most relational messages are expressed nonverbally. Chapters 4, 5, 8, 13, and 14 will emphasize the value of paying attention to your relational messages and those of others.

Communication Is Irreversible   At one time or another, we have all wished we could take back words we regretted uttering. Unfortunately, this isn't possible. Our words and deeds are recorded in others' memories, and we can't erase them. As the old saying goes, people may forgive, but they don't forget. In fact, often the more vigorously you try to erase an act, the more vividly it stands out. This means you should weigh your words carefully. An offhand comment or a critical remark uttered in the heat of conflict can haunt you long afterward.

Communication Is a Process   It is not accurate to talk about an "act" of communication as if sending or receiving a message were an isolated event. Rather, every communication event needs to be examined as part of its communication context, as we described a few pages ago. Suppose, for example, your boss responds to your request for a raise by saying, "I was going to ask you to take a *cut* in pay!" How would you react? The answer probably depends on several factors: Is your boss a joker or a serious person? How does the comment fit into the history of your relationship—have your boss's remarks been critical or supportive in the past? How does the message fit with ones you have received from other people? What mood are you in today? All these questions show that the meaning of a message depends in part on what has happened before. Each message is part of a process: It doesn't occur in isolation.

Communication Is Not a Panacea   Although communication can smooth out the bumps and straighten the road to success, it won't always get you what you want. If the quality of communication is poor, the results are likely to be disappointing. This explains why some problems grow worse the longer they are discussed. Misunderstandings and ill feelings can increase when people communicate badly. Even effective communication won't solve all problems: There are some situations in which the parties understand one another perfectly and still disagree. These limitations are important to understand as you begin to study communication on the job. Boosting your communication skills can increase your effectiveness, but it isn't a cure-all.

Communication Often Presents Ethical Challenges   One writer observed, "The trouble with business ethics is that many people think the phrase is an oxymoron. They hear it, giggle, and say things like, 'You mean like military intelligence, eh?' "[25] Despite this cynical attitude, there is a growing recognition that behaving ethically is an essential part of being an effective, promotable employee. As two business experts put it,

> *To be sure, business is still measured by revenues and profits, but today, shareholders, regulators, customers, the financial press—and even employees—expect those revenues and profits to be made in an ethical manner. Hardly a day goes by without the newspaper reminding us that business without ethics is business at risk.*
>
> *We see and hear firsthand how managers at companies, trade associations, and large organizations are working earnestly to inculcate ethical decision-making down through the ranks. Machiavellian employees are being weeded out and passed over in favor of individuals who demonstrate their core ethical values every day. Corporate infrastructure and performance systems that may have encouraged employees to do the wrong thing in the past are being scrutinized and modified to ensure good results. Employees are not "insulated" either from senior management or from the potential victims of misconduct. Rather, they are encouraged to dissent, report, challenge, and act when they spot a problem. Updated codes of conduct, 1-800 hot lines, ethics training, and ethics audits are fast becoming the norm at many businesses. Even boards of directors are taking the time to reflect on their ethical responsibilities.*
>
> *Finally, several hundred corporations and organizations now include an ethics officer in their organization chart who reports directly to the chairman. While all would agree that there is still work to be done, they would strongly debate the notion that business ethics is different from everyday ethics.*[26]

Because it is impossible to avoid facing ethical questions on the job, you will find an emphasis on principled communication throughout *Communicating at Work*. Along with discussions of ethical principles, every chapter contains at least one "ethical challenge" box inviting you to consider typical ethical issues you are likely to encounter as a business communicator. An example can be found on page 25.

A blanket obligation to communicate ethically can be too vague to be helpful in specific situations. Business professor Gene R. Laczniak suggests five ethical standards that may help communicators decide how to behave in a principled manner:[27]

> *The Golden Rule Standard:* Is this the way in which I would want to be treated by others?
>
> *The Professional Ethic:* How would this action be judged by an impartial jury of my professional peers?
>
> *Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative:* Could our society continue to function if everyone acted in this fashion?

The Utilitarian Rule: Does this action do the most good for the most people over the greatest period of time?

The "60 Minutes" Test: Would you be comfortable explaining your behavior on the famous national television show?

As you face the inescapable ethical challenges in your career, these guidelines can help you decide how to act.

Using Communication Networks

When people communicate in all but the smallest organizations, they need a system for managing the flow of information. You can appreciate this need if you consider how confusing unregulated communication would be, even in a small organization with only 17 employees. If each were free to pass information to every other person, each employee would be sending and receiving information—possibly conflicting information—from 16 other people. In fact, there would be 136 possible two-person combinations. In an organization with 200 members, there would be 19,900 possible combinations—clearly an unwieldy number.

With this degree of complexity, there is some system for structuring who will communicate with whom. These systems are called **communication networks**—regular patterns of person-to-person relationships through which information flows in an organization.[28] Two kinds of networks exist: formal and informal.

Formal Communication Networks

Formal communication networks are systems designed by management to dictate who should talk to whom to get a job done.[29] In a small organization, networks are so simple that they may hardly be noticeable; in a larger organization, they become more intricate. The most common way of describing formal communication networks is
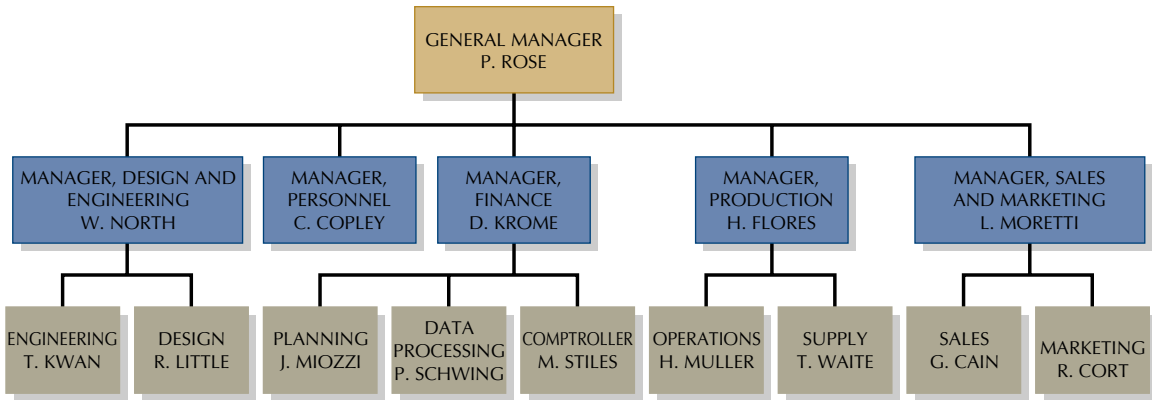
FIGURE 1–2
Dynacom Systems, Inc., Organizational Chart

with **organizational charts** like the one in Figure 1–2. Organizational charts are more than a bureaucrat's toy; they provide a clear guideline of who is responsible for a given task and which employees are responsible for others' performance. Figure 1–2 is a typical organizational chart. It shows that Henry Muller reports to his boss, Herman Flores, while Terri Kwan reports to Bill North. Organizational charts show that communication can flow in several directions: upward, downward, and horizontally.

Downward Communication   **Downward communication** occurs whenever superiors initiate messages to their subordinates. As Table 1–2 shows, there are several types of downward communication:

- *Job instructions*. Directions about what to do or how to do it: "When you restock the shelves, put the new merchandise behind the old stock."
- *Job rationale*. Explanations of how one task relates to other tasks: "We rotate the stock like that so the customers won't wind up with stale merchandise."
- *Procedures and practices*. Information about rules, regulations, policies, and benefits: "Don't try to argue with unhappy customers. If you can't handle them yourself, call the manager."
- *Feedback*. Information about how effectively a person is performing: "You're really catching on fast. If you keep up the good work, you'll be an assistant manager by the end of the year."
- *Indoctrination*. Information aimed at motivating employees by impressing the organization's mission upon them and specifying how they should relate to it: "People can buy the stuff we sell at other places, but we can bring them in here by giving them what they want quickly and pleasantly. If we do that, we'll all come out ahead."

Most managers would agree—at least in principle—that downward communication is important. It is hard to argue with the need for giving instructions, explaining rationale, describing procedures, and so on. Like their bosses, employees recognize the importance of downward communication. A study at General Electric (GE) revealed

Table 1–2
Types of Formal Communication in Organizations

	Downward Communication	Upward Communication	Horizontal (Lateral) Communication
Definition	Superior to subordinate	Subordinate to superior	Between co-workers with different areas of responsibility
Types	Job instructions Rationale for job Organizational procedures and practices Feedback to subordinates Indoctrination to organization culture	What subordinates are doing Unsolved work problems Suggestions for improvement Subordinates' feelings about job and co-workers	Coordinated tasks Solve problems Share information Manage conflicts Build rapport
Potential Benefits	Prevention/correction of employee errors Greater job satisfaction Improved morale	Prevention of new problems and solution of old ones Increased acceptance of management decisions	Increased cooperation among employees with different duties Greater understanding of organization's mission
Potential Problems	Insufficient or unclear messages Message overload Message distorted as it passes through one or more intermediaries	Superiors may discourage, disregard, or downplay importance of subordinates' messages Supervisors may unfairly blame subordinates for unpleasant news	Rivalry may occur between employees from different areas Specialization makes understanding difficult Information overload discourages contacts Physical barriers discourage contact Lack of motivation

that "clear communication between boss and worker" was the most important factor in job satisfaction for most people. GE was so impressed with the findings of this study that it launched a program to encourage managers to communicate more and more directly with their employees, including holding informal meetings to encourage interaction.[30]

Some experts have argued that providing rationale for assignments is especially important for "generation X" exployees—those born between the late 1960s and 1980. Management Consultant Barbara Fagan states that explanations are especially important for young employees who were raised in an antiauthoritarian climate: "The old business rule was 'Do what I say because I'm the boss.' That doesn't work with this generation. Gen Xers won't follow a rule until they understand and value it for themselves."[31]

The desire for feedback is probably so strong among most employees because supervisors rarely provide enough of it. As two researchers in the field, Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, put it: "The frequent complaint . . . by the individual is that he does not know where he stands with his superiors."[32] Many companies do take a more enlightened ap-

proach to feedback. Ed Carlson, former president of United Airlines, is generally credited with turning the company from a loser into a winner during his tenure. Part of his success was due to keeping United's employees—all of them—aware of how the company was doing. "Nothing is worse for morale than a lack of information down in the ranks," he said. "I call it NETMA—Nobody Ever Tells Me Anything—and I have tried hard to minimize that problem."[33] True to his word, Carlson passed along to the field staff information on United's operations that was previously considered too important to circulate.

Upward Communication   Messages flowing from subordinates to superiors are labeled **upward communication.** Virtually every organization *claims* to seek out upward messages, but many aren't as open to employee opinions as they claim. In some organizations, questioning the boss can be a recipe for professional suicide. "The disconnect between rhetoric and reality is why Scott Adams [creator of the 'Dilbert' comic strip] is a millionaire," says management expert Warren Bennis.[34]

Businesses that really are open to upward communication can profit from the opinions of employees.[35] Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, the largest retailer in the United States, claimed that "our best ideas come from clerks and stockboys."[36] Industry observers credit the dramatic turnaround of Mattel Corporation to the openness to employee suggestions of its CEO, John Aberman.[37] Upward communication can convey four types of messages:[38]

- *What subordinates are doing:* "We'll have that job done by closing time today."
- *Unsolved work problems:* "We're still having trouble with the air conditioner in the accounting office."
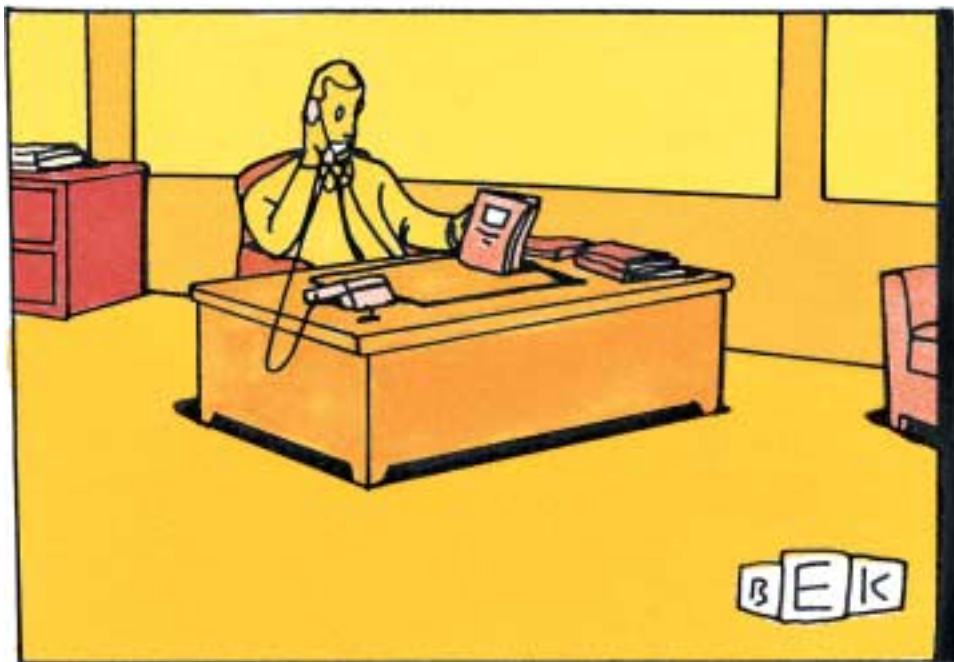
"I'd like you to read it and tell me what you think I want to hear."

Bruce Eric Kaplan, *Fast Company,* June 2000.

career tip

Getting Recognized by Your Bosses

According to Muriel Solomon, "The big secret to getting recognized is to give creative thinking a priority." She advises that you can showcase your talent, create interest in your work, and display your potential in several ways:

- Present proposals to your boss. Learn the history of a challenge, develop a specific plan that shows creativity and understanding of the company's needs. Don't wait for someone to recognize you or choose you for a prime assignment.
- Volunteer for committees, to chair a committee, or to sponsor a workshop, hearing, or sports event. Create opportunities to enlarge your working relationships with people at many levels of your organization. Prepare concise summaries and submit reports to your boss.

- Get your thoughts printed. Contribute quality writing in the company magazines, department newsletters, or association or professional journals. Distribute copies to your boss, bulletin boards, intranets.
- Use thoughtful gestures to build bridges. Devote 5 minutes a day to raising your visibility by thanking people who worked on your project, calling or sending notes of thanks to the supervisors of those who helped you (with a blind copy to the one who's help you received), and feeding your gratitude into the grapevine.

Source: Muriel Solomon, Getting Praised, Raised and Recognized *(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993).*

- *Suggestions for improvement:* "I think I've figured a way to give people the vacation schedules they want and still keep our staffing up."
- *How subordinates feel about each other and the job:* "I'm having a hard time working with Louie. He seems to think I'm mad at him." Or, "I'm getting frustrated. I've been in the same job for over a year now, and I'm itching for more responsibility."

These messages can benefit both subordinates and superiors, and this explains why one survey showed that organization members find upward communication to be the most important and satisfying kind of on-the-job interaction.[39] Upward communication is especially important for women. Females who engage in more interactions with their supervisors advance in the organizational hierarchy faster than those who do not spend as much time communicating upward.[40] A probable explanation for this fact is that women have fewer informal connections with powerful decision-makers in some organizations. Given this absence of connections, it makes sense that women would rely on official contacts to work efficiently and effectively.

Despite the importance of upward communication, employees find participation in upward communication extremely difficult. Table 1–2 suggests some reasons why. Being frank with superiors can be risky, especially when the news isn't what the boss wants to hear. Busy superiors can also be too preoccupied or certain of their expertise to pay attention to employees. In one survey of over 9,000 U.S. workers, only 29 percent said that companies acted on their suggestions.[41]

Most of the responsibility for improving upward communication rests with managers. They can begin the process by announcing their willingness to hear from subordinates. A number of vehicles facilitate upward messages: an open-door policy, grievance procedures, periodic interviews, group meetings, and the suggestion box, to name a few. Formal channels aren't the only way to promote upward messages. Informal contacts can often be most

effective; chats during breaks, in the elevator, or at social gatherings can sometimes tell more than planned sessions. But no method will be effective unless a manager is sincerely interested in hearing from subordinates and genuinely values their ideas. Just talking about this isn't enough. Employees have to see evidence of a willingness to hear upward messages—both good and bad—before they will really open up.

Horizontal Communication   A third type of organizational interaction is **horizontal communication** (sometimes called **lateral communication**). It consists of messages between members of an organization with equal power. The most obvious type of horizontal communication goes on between members of the same division of an organization: office workers in the same department, co-workers on a construction project, and so on. In other cases, lateral communication occurs between people from different areas: accounting calls maintenance to get a machine repaired, hospital admissions calls intensive care to reserve a bed, and so on. Horizontal communication serves five purposes:[42]

- *Task coordination:* "Let's get together this afternoon and set up a production schedule."
- *Problem solving:* "It takes 3 days for my department to get reports from yours. How can we speed things up?"
- *Sharing information:* "I just found out that a big convention is coming to town next week, so we ought to get ready for lots of business."
- *Conflict resolution:* "I've heard that you were complaining about my work to the boss. If you're not happy, I wish you'd tell me first."
- *Building rapport:* "I appreciate the way you got that rush job done on time. I'd like to say thanks by buying you lunch when it's convenient."

Research suggests that people in most organizations communicate horizontally, but the reasons for doing so are different in high-performing groups from those in less effective ones.[43] Low-performing groups are likely to reach out to different parts of the organization to get information on how to follow existing procedures. For example, an engineer might contact the purchasing department to check on the status of an equipment order. By contrast, lateral contacts in high-performing organizations are used to get the information needed to solve complex and difficult work problems. For instance, before starting design work on a new product, the same engineer might contact the sales manager to find out what features customers want most. Top-performing organizations encourage people from different areas to get together and share ideas. At Hewlett-Packard, Worldwide Personnel Manager Barbara Waugh and her colleagues spent 5 years improving horizontal communication. "My role is to create mirrors that show the whole what the parts are doing—through coffee talks and small meetings, through building a network, through bringing people together who have similar or complementary ideas."[44]

Despite the importance of good horizontal communication, several forces work to discourage communication between peers.[45] *Rivalry* is one. People who feel threatened by one another aren't likely to be cooperative. The threat can come from competition for a promotion, raise, or other scarce resource. Sometimes rivalry occurs over an informal role. For example, two office comedians might feel threatened each time the other gets a laugh; that could inhibit their cooperation. Another challenge is the *specialization* that makes it hard for people with different technical specialties to understand one another. *Information overload* can also discourage employees from reaching out to others in different areas, and a simple *lack of motivation* is another problem. Finally, *physical barriers* can interfere with horizontal connections.

1. The editor of religious books and the publisher both attend the Second Avenue Christian Science Church.

2. The editor of cookbooks is a close personal friend of the publisher of the periodical division and recently influenced her to promote another friend to manager of educational journals.

3. The editor of fiction and the editor of travel books bypass the assistant publishers to enlist the aid of the publisher of the book division in getting raises.

4. The producer of feature films is engaged to the editor of *The College Librarian*.

5. The director of the film division and the publisher of the periodical division disagree with the publisher's fiscal policies and collaborate against her.
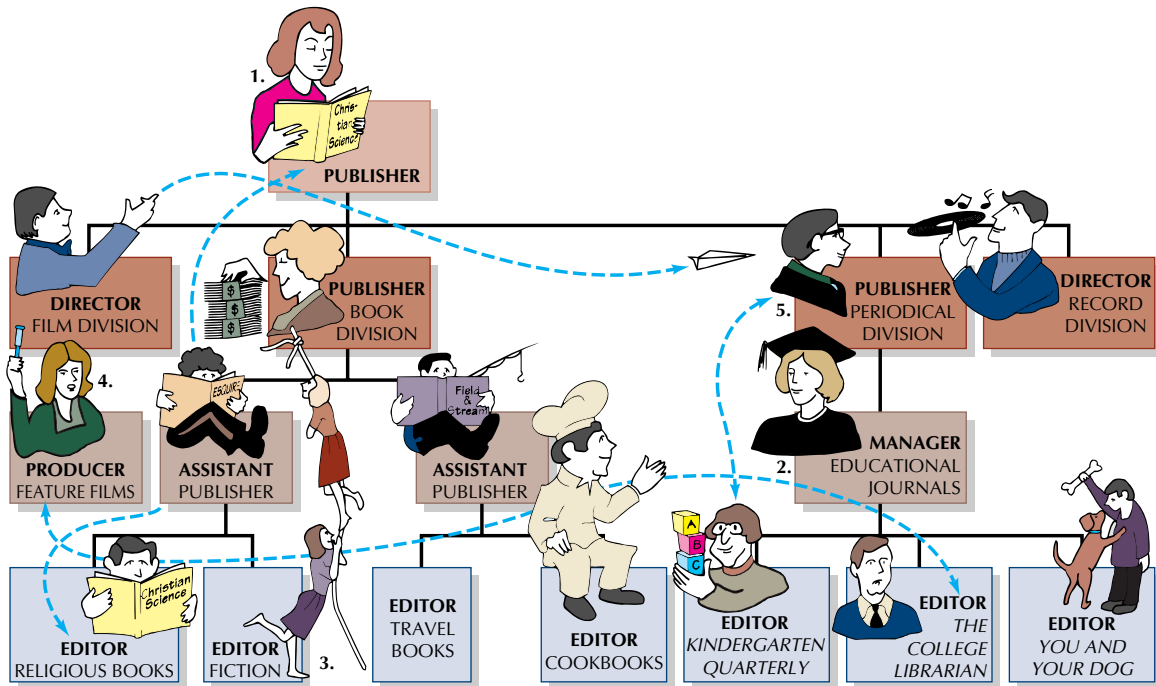

FIGURE 1–3

An Informal Communication Network. Social relationships not recognized by the organization can influence decision-making.

Adapted from *Business Today* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp. 102–3.

Informal Communication Networks

So far, we have focused on networks within organizations that are created by management. While organizational charts can describe some of the ways people interact in organizations, they don't tell the whole story. Alongside the formal networks, every organization also has **informal communication networks**—patterns of interaction based on friendships, shared personal or career interests, and proximity. As Figure 1–3 shows, informal relationships within organizations operate in ways that have little to do with the formal relationships laid out in organizational charts.[46] And beyond any sort of organizational connection, people are connected with one another through informal personal networks—with friends, neighbors, family members, and all sorts of other relationships.

As Figure 1–3 suggests, some informal networks arise because of personal interests. Two colleagues who are avid basketball fans or share a fascination with rare books are more likely to swap information on work than co-workers who have no such bonds. Personal friendships also create connections that can lead to increased communica-

tion. Finally, physical proximity increases the chances for interaction. Shared office space or frequent meetings around the copying machine make it likely that people will exchange information. Even sharing restrooms can lead to networking, as public relations executive James E. Lukaszewski observes in describing what happens during breaks in predominantly male business meetings:

> *This may sound facetious, even silly, but when these meetings break, where are the women and where are the men? The guys go to the porcelain in that little room with M-E-N on the door. . . . The guys are standing there, facing the wall, talking and deciding things. It's a critical opportunity for important verbal communication to take place during times of decision making.*[47]

Functions of Informal Networks within Organizations
As the following examples show, not all informal messages are idle rumors. Informal communication can serve several useful functions.

- *Confirming*. Some informal communication confirms formal messages. You have probably heard this sort of confirmation yourself: "The boss is really serious about cutting down on long-distance calls this time. I heard him yelling about it when I walked past his office."

- *Expanding*. Information communication can fill in the gaps left by incomplete formal messages. You might say to an experienced co-worker: "The invitation to the office party says 'casual dress.' What does that mean—jeans and T-shirt or sport coat and tie?"

- *Expediting*. Informal networks can often deliver messages more quickly than official channels can. Canny job hunters, for example, often use personal contacts to learn about openings within an organization long before the vacancies are published.

- *Contradicting*. Sometimes informal networks contradict official messages. You might learn from a friend in accounting that the deadline for purchases on this year's budget isn't as firm as it sounded in the comptroller's recent memo.

- *Circumventing*. Informal contacts can sometimes help you bypass official channels that are unnecessarily cumbersome and time-consuming. Your tennis partner who works in duplicating might sneak in an occasional rush job for you instead of putting it at the end of the line.

- *Supplementing*. Sometimes even management realizes that informal communication can get the job done better than the more formal variety can. Paradoxical as it seems, many companies elevate informal communication to an official policy by encouraging open, unstructured contacts between people from various parts of the organization. A description of Hewlett-Packard's approach to problem solving characterizes this style, which has been termed MBWA, "management by wandering around."

Some observers consider informal contacts to be the primary means of communication within an organization. In one survey, 57 percent of the respondents said that the grapevine is "the only way to find out what's really happening" in their organizations.[48] Two well-known analysts flatly assert that as much as 90 percent of what goes on in a company has nothing to do with formal events.[49] Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, David Krackhardt and Jeffrey Hanson capture the difference between formal and informal networks: "If the formal organization is the skeleton of a company, the informal is the central nervous system."[50]

Like the human nervous system, informal networks are faster, and often more dependable, than formal channels.[51] They also provide a shortcut (and sometimes a way around) for the slower and more cumbersome formal channels, making innovation easier.[52] This fact helps explain why organizational decision-makers tend to rely on verbal information from trusted associates.[53] Smart communicators don't just rely on informal contacts with peers for information; they take advantage of sources from throughout the organization. One study revealed that general managers spent a great deal of time with people who were not direct subordinates, superiors, or peers—people with whom, according to the official chain of command, they had no need to deal. Although many of these people—secretaries, lower-level subordinates, and supervisors with little power—seemed relatively unimportant to outsiders, successful managers all seemed to cultivate such contacts.[54]

Enlightened organizations do everything possible to encourage constructive, informal interaction. Siemens Corp. leaves overhead projectors and empty pads of paper in its factory lunchrooms to facilitate informal meetings.[55] Corning Glass deliberately installed escalators in its new engineering building to boost the kind of face-to-face contacts that are less likely in elevators. 3M sponsors clubs for any groups of employees who request them, realizing that this sort of employee interaction is likely to encourage new ideas that will help the company. Other firms mingle workers from different departments in the same office, convinced that people who rub elbows will swap ideas and see themselves as part of a companywide team.

Informal networks don't just operate within organizations. Friends, neighbors, and community members increase their effectiveness by sharing information. In some cities, Chambers of Commerce host networking events to encourage these ties among community businesses. Even without these organized contacts, most people are surprised to realize just how many people they know who can offer useful information.

Cultivating Personal Networks on the Job and Beyond Although everyone is part of informal networks, smart communicators work deliberately to cultivate personal relationships. This activity is usually called **networking**—the process of strategically meeting people and maintaining contacts to get career information, ad-

Table 1–3
Sources of Information from Personal Networks

Family members
Friends
Neighbors
Social acquaintances
Fellow workers (current and former)
Bosses (current and former)
Religious leaders
Professionals (doctors, dentists, accountants, attorneys, etc.)
School contacts (faculty, students, counselors, etc.)
Anyone whose services you have paid for in the last year

vice, and leads. Developing a strong informal communication network is not all coincidence. Several steps can help you to develop these important links.[56]

View Everyone as a Networking Prospect   You probably know more people with networking potential than you would suspect. See Table 1–3 for some suggestions. Within an organization, the best informants are often people with relatively low official status. A receptionist, for example, may have a better idea of who talks with whom than anyone else in the organization. Administrative assistants are exposed to most of the information addressed to their bosses, and they usually serve as gatekeepers who can give or deny access to them. Custodial and maintenance people travel around the building and, in their rounds, see and hear many interesting things. Besides, a friendly repair person can fix a broken widget now instead of insisting that you file a work order that probably won't get attention for 6 weeks. Of course, treating everyone you deal with respectfully is ethical, as well as being smart.

Get Referrals to Secondary Sources   The benefits of personal networks don't stop with your personal acquaintances. Each of the people you know has his or her own connections, some of whom could be useful to you. For example, you may not know anyone who can recommend the best accounting software program or who is plugged into the job market in Oklahoma City, but there's a good chance someone in your network can refer you to a person who can help you find the answer you're seeking. If you ask 10 people for referrals and each of them knows 10 others who might be able to help, you have the potential of support from 100 information givers. So, if the person you first ask doesn't have the information you're seeking, the question to ask is, "Can you suggest someone who can help me?"

Secondary sources are so valuable that some networking groups and websites exist to help users find the contacts they need. See the box on page 22 for tips about how to find these groups. Having a network of people who can refer you to others can be especially helpful in today's workforce, where people often stay in a job for only a year or two.

Seek a Mentor   A mentor is a person who acts as a guide, trainer, coach, and counselor; who teaches you the informal rules of an organization or a field; and who imparts the kinds of wisdom that come from firsthand experience. Many organizations have formal

programs that match new employees with experienced ones. Other mentor–protégé relationships develop informally and unofficially. However you find one, a mentor can be invaluable. This is especially true for women, who often face extra barriers to "good old boy" informal networks of men.[57]

Whatever the relationship, some rules guide mentoring relationships.[58] First, the relationship should be primarily professional. If you have serious personal problems, turn to a counselor. A mentor may be able to help you with some personal problems as they affect your work life, but a mentor should not become an emotional crutch. Second, any personal insights shared by mentors and protégés should be kept confidential. Third, don't expect a mentor to grant you special favors, intervene on your behalf with your boss, or boost your chances for promotion. The advice you receive is reward enough.

Become a Bridge   If you position yourself as a knowledgeable link between groups, your credibility will grow and you are likely to become recognized as someone people want to include in their networks.[59] Whenever possible, make an effort to put people who will profit from contact in touch with one another: "You're looking for a new bookkeeper? I know someone who would be perfect for you!" When you help others by serving as a bridge, they will be more willing to help you in the future.

Ask Questions   When you discover a knowledgeable information source, ask for explanations of events. The simple question "What's going on here?" can generate more information than can a stack of policy manuals and managerial briefings. The other key question to ask is, "Who can help me?" Your personal contacts can often direct you to the person or persons who can give you the information you need or support your efforts.

Don't Flaunt Informal Shortcuts   Almost no one totally follows the book—even the managers who wrote it. Nonetheless, it's asking for trouble to act in ways that blatantly violate official procedures. You might occasionally ask a friend who runs the company's copy center to give your urgent job special rush treatment, but it would be a mistake to flaunt your good fortune to colleagues. Likewise, if you get a special supplement to your travel budget because your boss's boss happens to learn about your request, be sure to report the news to your immediate superior, stressing the luck involved, and then avoid the temptation to share your good luck with fellow workers who won't be taking desired trips.

Choosing the Optimal Communication Channel

As a business communicator, you often can choose how to deliver a message. Deciding which communication channel to use isn't a trivial matter. Sometimes a written message succeeds where an oral one fails; at other times talking to the recipient will produce results that the printed word can't match. An understanding of these two channels will help you make the best choice about how to deliver your important messages.

Face-to-Face Communication

Face-to-face communication comes in many forms. Some are one-to-one meetings, either scheduled or spur of the moment. Others involve small groups of people, gathering spontaneously or in formal meetings. Still other face-to-face communication occurs in large groups, where one or more speakers make presentations to an audience.

On page 13–14 you were introduced to five guidelines for judging ethical communication:

- The Golden Rule
- The Professional Ethic
- The Categorical Imperative
- The Utilitarian Rule
- The "60 Minutes" Test

Use these guidelines as you decide how you would handle the following situation. Would following some of these principles lead to different behaviors than observing others?

You and two co-workers will each be presenting competing reorganization plans to a steering committee on Monday. The committee will select one of the three reorganization plans to implement. Through your sister's friendship with the committee chair, you know that the chair will be attending a party your sister is hosting this weekend and that you could speak with the chair personally to argue for your plan. You know this personal contact could give you an advantage in building support for your plan over the other two, but you wonder if it is right to let who you know influence this decision and give you an edge over your co-workers. What do you do?

Whatever the setting and number of people, all types of face-to-face communication possess the same qualities.

One potential advantage of face-to-face communication is its *speed*. Once you make contact with your audience, there is no time lag between the transmission of a message and its reception. If you need a price or have to have the funds in an account released *now*, putting your request in a letter or memo won't be much help. A second advantage of face-to-face communication is the *control* it gives you as the speaker.[60] You might spend hours drafting a memo, letter, or report only to have the recipient scan it superficially or not read it at all. In a personal contact, however, you have much more command over the receiver's attention. Another enormous advantage of face-to-face communication is that it permits *instantaneous feedback*. When you speak directly to one or more listeners, you can respond to questions as soon as they arise. You can rephrase or elaborate when your listeners seem confused, and you can speed up if details aren't necessary. A final advantage of face-to-face interaction is its *personal quality*. Dan Baille, corporate manager at Block Drug Co., which spends over $4 million annually on employee travel, makes the case for face-to-face contact: "Nothing takes the place of a handshake, going to lunch, seeing their eyes."[61]

Although it has many advantages, face-to-face communication isn't always the best approach. The biggest drawback of personal contacts is the difficulty in arranging them. Even when communicators are in the same building, scheduling a meeting can be difficult and frustrating. When the people who need to meet are separated by greater distances, personal contact is expensive and time-consuming. Even a crosstown trip for a half-hour meeting can take most of the morning or afternoon. A personal encounter might also be unproductive if the contact antagonizes one or more of the participants. If the personalities or the subject is likely to make someone angry or defensive, then less confrontational forms of communication might be better.

Teleconferencing

Face-to-face meetings may be desirable, but distance often makes them impractical. Teleconferencing is billed by its promoters as the next best thing to meeting in person. This technology allows participants in two or more locations to see and speak with each other. For example, retailers like Wal-Mart and Kmart use teleconferencing to keep headquarters-based merchandisers in touch with far-flung store managers.[62]

Telephone and Voice Mail

The telephone lets you contact a receiver who would be impossible to reach in person. You can touch base with someone halfway around the world in less time than it takes to catch an elevator to the next floor. The telephone can even help you get through to busy people who are nearby. Office hermits who barricade themselves behind closed doors will often drop everything when the telephone rings—or at least answer it grudgingly. A telephone conversation does lack the visual feedback that often reveals how your message is getting across, although vocal cues—tone of voice, pauses, interruptions, pitch, and rate—can give you a good idea of the other person's reaction to your message.

Despite its advantages, telephoning has drawbacks. Even when you are able to "reach out and touch someone" with the phone, making contact can be problematic if you reach the caller at a bad time. Your chances of having a successful conversation will drop if the other person is hurried, angry, or distracted. For this reason, it's smart to ask, "Is this a good time?" before launching into your conversation. Scheduling a second call when you have the best chance of getting what you need is often worth the inconvenience. Telephone conversations also make it harder to hold the attention of your listener. Recall, for instance, all the fingernail cleaning and paper-clip sculpting you have done while unsuspecting speakers have rattled on.

Real-time communication isn't the only type of telephone communication. **Voice mail** is a high-tech version of the answering machine. Many communicators hate voice mail, often with justification. Some voice mail menus and submenus can take forever ("If you want information about schedules, press 1 now. For a list of addresses, press 2. For product information, press 3. . . ."), and "clever" greetings can be annoying. But voice mail does have its advantages. It allows you to leave a message at any time of the day or night. You can feel confident that the recipient will actually receive the message in your own voice, just as you spoke it, without the omissions and distortions that come when an intermediary transcribes your message.

Even at their best, voice mail messages might seem inferior to speaking in person to the other party. Sometimes, though, a voice mail message can be even better than a personal contact. Leaving a recorded message can save you from wasting time swapping formulistic pleasantries with people you'd rather not talk to. Also, delivering your message electronically can keep the other person from responding in ways you don't want to hear. With voice mail you can decline an invitation, express just the right amount of irritation, or offer an excuse—all without having the other person talk back. You can use voice mail most effectively if you follow the tips on page 28.

Despite its advantages, oral communication isn't a perfect medium. Possibly the greatest disadvantage of speech is its *transience*. All communication is fragile, but the spoken word is especially prone to being forgotten or misunderstood. Listeners quickly forget much of what they hear—half of a message almost immediately and half of the remainder 2 days later. Thus, a customer might forget three of the five product features you mentioned, or your boss might forget exactly *why* you need more staff support and only recall the dollar amount you requested.

Even if they remember an oral message, listeners are likely to *distort* it. Some details drop out with each telling of a story. Facts and figures change. Receivers may even invent variations on the truth, just to make the story more interesting or to make it fit their own idea of what ought to have happened. The farther the message travels in space and time from its original sender, the greater the chance of distortion.

Written Communication

Written communication comes in a variety of forms. Letters, memos, bulletins, and reports are familiar fixtures in almost everybody's career.

Written messages have a different set of advantages and drawbacks than their spoken counterparts. Unlike speech, written communication is *permanent*. Once your words are down on paper, they are saved for future reference—either to your delight or to your undying embarrassment and chagrin. While people may have trouble accurately recalling what you said a few hours ago, they can refer to your written remarks years later. Even if the receiver has lost or forgotten your message, you can always supply a copy from your files.

Guidelines for Using Voice Mail

Voice mail can be a useful tool or an annoyance to the receiver, depending on how you use it. The following tips will help you get your message across most effectively when you begin speaking after the beep.

1. *Know the schedule of the person you're trying to reach.* Doing so can boost the odds of reaching the person you're seeking (if that is your goal). Some people are most likely to be near their phones in the early morning or late afternoon. Others are likely to be in (or out) during lunch. Be aware of time zone differences.

2. *Leave the name of the person for whom the message is directed.* Most home answering machines and some voice mail boxes in businesses are shared by more than one person. Don't make the recipient guess who you're trying to reach.

3. *Identify your name and phone number at the beginning of the message.* Doing so early will enable listeners who want to replay them to do so without replaying the whole message. Unless the recipient knows you well, leave your first *and* last name. You

may not be the only John, Kim, Lizzie, or Gus in the receiver's circle of acquaintants. If there's any possibility of misunderstanding, spell your last name. Remember that your name and number are as familiar to you as your own face, but the receiver needs to understand them clearly.

4. *Organize your message in advance.* Don't confuse the recipient by leaving a rambling message in which you carry on a conversation with yourself, change your mind, or switch ideas mid message. This sort of rambling makes you sound muddleheaded, and it is likely to annoy the recipient.

5. *Keep the message as short as possible.* Even a 1-minute message can seem endless to the person who receives it. A long message—even if it is well organized—may contain too much information for the listener to digest. If you have a great deal to say, consider alerting your receiver to the main points, and then send the details via fax, memo, or overnight mail.

6. *Speak slowly and clearly.* The vocal fidelity of some voice mail systems is poor, and you don't want your message to be misunderstood.

Along with its permanence, written communication can be *easier to understand* than speech. Readers can study complex passages as many times as necessary, a luxury they do not have when the same message is delivered orally. They can take a break if their interest wanes and, after a cup of coffee or a quick stretch, come back to what they were reading refreshed and ready to go on.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of written communication is that you can *compose it in advance.* You can take as much time as necessary to shape a message just as you want it, pondering every word if necessary. You can try out several versions on test readers to anticipate the reactions of your real audience, and you can make changes until you get the desired response.

Finally, written messages are *less prone to errors.* Even the best-rehearsed oral presentations can go awry. You can misplace an important set of papers or forget to mention a key idea. Furthermore, the spontaneity that makes spoken communication so effective can backfire. Your attempt to improvise might sound confusing or lame, and the joke you thought would make the perfect ice-breaker might fall flat. Every speaker has thought, hours after a conversation, "If only I'd said . . ." When you communicate in writing, you have time to choose exactly the right words.

Electronic mail (or **e-mail**) allows communicators to send and respond to one another's written messages via computer. In the United States and Canada, e-mail has become the most used communication tool on the job: 97 percent of workers surveyed report using it daily or several times a week.[63] Like the telephone and faxes, e-mail is virtually in-

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stantaneous: Once you click on the "send" icon on your computer, the message will be waiting for the addressee, usually in a matter of minutes. Along with being a tool for external communication, e-mail is used as an alternative to telephones and personal contacts within an office, where it is often labeled as part of an **intranet**—an infrastructure that allows people with-in an organization to exchange information in digital form.[64]

Like voice mail, e-mail is asynchronous, so you can leave messages for others to pick up at their convenience. Because your ideas appear in writing, e-mail (like letters and faxes) makes it easier to comprehend lengthy, detailed messages. E-mail lets you send the same message to several people virtually anywhere in the world. Along with speed and convenience, e-mail provides an astonishing degree of access to people you otherwise might not be able to reach. Once you have located someone's e-mail address, your messages zip by secretaries and other gatekeepers to the important person you're trying to reach. Ron Compton, President of the Aetna Life & Casualty Company, offers a personal example:

> *Most of my electronic mail use is with my direct reports and other people I work closely with—accountants, lawyers, planners, and so on. But other people send me messages too . . . I'll give a speech or talk somewhere, and the next day I'll have three or four messages from people I've never heard of. I always answer them.*
>
> *Can you imagine somebody sitting down there who gets the nerve to send a message to the president of this huge company, and then gets one back? I'll bet that every time somebody who doesn't know me gets a message back, a thank you or something, I'll bet 300 other people will hear about that. Talk about a machine for changing culture and for communicating!*[65]

E-mail's informal, almost spontaneous nature distinguishes it from most other forms of written communication. Communicators using e-mail usually have fewer concerns with the kind of formatting that is important in other business correspondence, and the

ease of logging on and sending a message increases the frequency and informality of contacts. But along with ease of use comes the risk of spontaneous messages that the sender might later regret. Research shows that people are more likely to behave irresponsibly via e-mail than in face-to-face conversations.[66] A rude or flippant remark can come back to haunt you—especially since e-mails can be stored and forwarded to any number of other recipients who you never intended to see it. This lesson was learned the hard way by 39 Dow Chemical employees—some 25-year veterans of the company—who were fired for sending inappropriate e-mails through the company's intranet.[67] Likewise, the top U.S. Marine general in Japan was embarrassed when his e-mail reference to Okinawan officials as "nuts and a bunch of wimps" appeared in a local newspaper.[68] The undying nature of e-mail cost Chevron Oil $2.2 million, when a group of female employees brought suit over offensive e-mail postings.[69]

The speed and easy-to-use nature of e-mail also make it a tool for improving personal relationships on the job.[70] Speeding up routine communication leaves more time for personal contacts, which the medium also makes more possible. Technology consultant Beau Carr explains: "It may sound backwards, but people who refuse to learn about technology are the ones losing the human touch. . . . Users can focus more energy and attention on relating to other people and at the same time deliver products and services faster, better, and probably less expensively."[71]

Along with its advantages, e-mail can easily become a drain on your productivity. The technology is so quick and easy that it is prone to overuse: Your in-box can fill up with unimportant messages, and you can go overboard in sending junk mail to others. At computer chip maker Intel Corp., employees spend an average of 2.5 hours per day sending and receiving e-mails.[72] See the Appendix of this book for guidelines on how to use e-mail effectively.

Computer conferencing allows individuals and groups to work on documents that are shared via computer. As one person makes suggestions or changes a document, the others can view that change on their own screens. Document conferences can take place in real time, with participants interacting via their computers at the same moment, or over different periods of time, with participants working independently but picking up on the comments and input of others in their group. Communication experts have developed computer software (called group decision support systems, or "groupware") that facilitates electronic conferencing.

Instant messaging (IM) is a tool that lets you exchange messages in real time via your computer. You create a list of people with whom you want to communicate, and whenever you are online, a window on your screen pops up showing which people on your contact list are available. Whenever you want, you can send a message to one or more of the people on your list.

There are many advantages to instant messaging. Along with being quick and easy to use, the technology is free, which can help you reduce the number of expensive long distance or international telephone calls. Instant messaging also allows users to send urgent information or queries to others currently logged on to the network or online. For example, customer support agents at many companies can instantly get help from their colleagues when stumped by a customer's problem. If you want, you can keep a record of your IM sessions. Instant messaging is the ultimate "multitasking" technology: If necessary, you can use it while typing away on a document and chatting on the phone; and when you don't want to deal with interruptions, you can turn off the feature so people on your contact list get a "not accepting messages" response when they try to reach you.

For all these reasons, instant messaging has grown from a chat room for teenagers and lonely adults to a valuable tool in business and the professions, used by groups as diverse as international scientists, computer manufacturers, retailers, and the Internal

Revenue Service.[73] In one poll of 50 Fortune 1000 companies, 36 percent had employees who used instant messaging to keep in touch.[74]
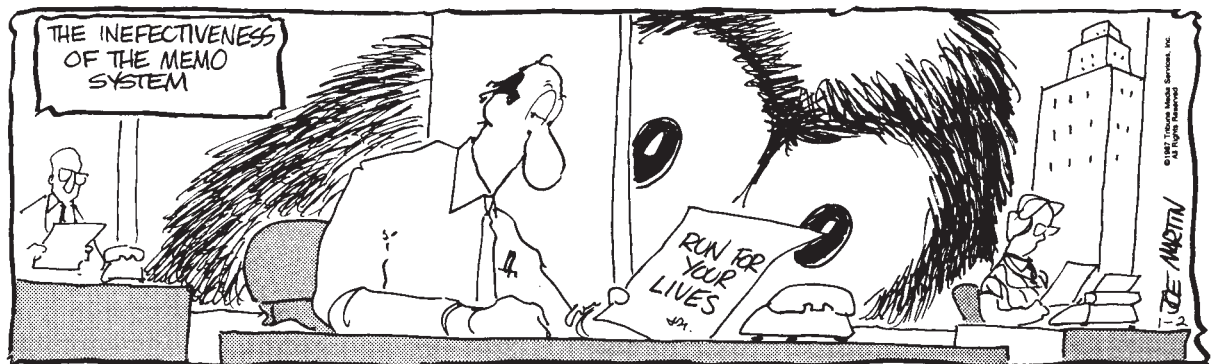
Along with its advantages, instant messaging does have drawbacks. Typing is certainly more cumbersome than talking on the phone, and text-only messages lack the richness of spoken conversations. Also, instant messages that pop up on the screen demand your attention and can be a distraction from other tasks. Finally, your failure to respond quickly to others' messages can be perceived by senders as lack of interest, especially if they know you are logged on at your computer. Like other technologies, instant messaging has its advantages, but it isn't the perfect medium for all occasions.

Which Channel to Use

New technologies have given businesspeople a wider range of choices for communication than ever before, and each channel has its uses. The question, then, is not which communication channel to use, but when to use each one most effectively. As Table 1–4 shows, each communication channel has both advantages and drawbacks. Despite these pros and cons, there are guidelines that will help you decide how to deliver your message most effectively. Following these guidelines can produce dramatic results. In one survey, managers who were identified as "media sensitive"—those who matched the channel to the message—were almost twice as likely to receive top ratings in their performance reviews when compared with less media-sensitive peers.[75]

In general, oral communication is best for messages that require a personal dimension. For example, relationships improve and problems decline when physicians and the administrators of hospitals and health care systems meet in person instead of exchanging messages through less personal channels.[76] Oral channels are also best for ideas that have a strong need for visual support—demonstration, photos or slides, and so on. Spoken communication is also especially useful when there is a need for immediate feedback, such as question-and-answer sessions or a quick reply to your ideas.

Written communication (with the exception of e-mail) works best when you want to create a relatively formal tone. Writing is almost always the best medium when you must choose your words carefully. Writing is also better than speaking when you want to convey complicated ideas that are likely to require much study and thought by the receiver. It is also smart to put your message in writing when you want it to be the final word, with no feedback or discussion. Finally, writing is best for *any* message if you want a record to exist. In business and the professions, sending confirming letters and memoranda is common practice, as is keeping minutes of meetings. These steps guarantee

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Table 1–4 Considerations in Choosing a Communication Channel

	Speed of Establishing Contact	Time Required for Feedback	Amount of Information Conveyed	Control over How Message Is Composed and Delivered
Person-to-Person	Variable	Immediate (after contact established)	Highest	Moderate
Teleconferencing	Usually difficult to set up	Immediate (after contact established)	High	Moderate
Telephone	Variable	Immediate (after contact established)	Vocal, but not visual	Moderate
Voice Mail	Fast	Delayed	Vocal, but not visual	Higher
E-Mail	Fast	Delayed	Lowest (text only, no formatting)	High
Fax	Fast	Delayed	Words, numbers, and images, but few nonverbal cues	High
Computer Conferencing	Difficult to set up, then easy	Immediate	Text, and sometimes visual images	Moderate
Hard Copy	Slow (depending on distance)	Delayed	Words, numbers, and images, but few nonverbal cues	High

that what is said will be a matter of record, useful in case of later misunderstandings or disputes and in case anyone wants to review the history of an issue.

Besides message-related considerations, the culture of the organization in which you work may favor some communication channels over others.[77] For example, Microsoft Corp. is so e-mail intensive that some voice mail greetings include the directive "If you're from Microsoft, please try to send electronic mail." In other organizations, voice mail is the preferred channel. Kirk Froggatt, a vice president at Silicon Graphics offers one explanation: "There's something fundamentally more personal about voice mail. You can get the tone of voice, the passion. People like that."[78] Along with an organization's overall preference for some channels, it's important to consider the preferences of departments, or even individuals. For example, the computer support staff in some organizations respond to e-mails, while in other compa-

Control over Receiver's Attention	Personal vs. Formal	Cost	Permanent Record	Effective for Detailed Messages
Highest	Personal	Depends on distance	None	Weak
High	Personal	High	Usually none	Weak
Less than with visual contact	Personal	Low	Usually none	Weakest
Low	Personal	Low	Possible	Weak
Low	Personal	Low (after e-mail account established)	Yes	Better
Low	More formal	Low (after equipment is purchased)	Yes	Good
Low	More personal	Low (once network is established)	Usually	Good
Low	More formal	Low to modest	Yes	Good

nies a phone call to the help desk is the best way to get a quick response. And, if you know a co-worker or your boss only responds to face-to-face reminders, your best bet is to use that approach.

In many cases, it is wise to send a message using both oral and written channels. This kind of redundancy captures the best of both media, and it works in a variety of settings:

- Distribute a written text or outline that parallels your presentation.
- Follow a letter, fax, or e-mail message with a phone call, or call first and then write.
- Send a report or proposal and then make appointments with your readers to discuss it.

You won't always have the luxury of choosing the communication channel. But when you do, the right decision can make your message clearer and more effective.

summary

No matter what the job, communication is both a frequent and a critically important process. It occupies more time than any other activity and often makes the difference between success and failure for the organization as a whole and for its individual members.

Communication, as the term is used in this book, is a process in which people who occupy differing environments exchange messages in a specific context via one or more channels and often respond to each other's messages through verbal and nonverbal feedback. The effectiveness of communication can be diminished by physical, physiological, or psychological noise, which can exist within either the sender, receiver, or channel. Communication is an unavoidable, irreversible process. Although it is vitally important, it is not a panacea that can solve every personal and organizational problem.

Attending to the fundamental elements of the communication process can improve the chances of success: choosing the most credible sender, picking the optimal receivers and attending to their needs, developing messages strategically and structuring them clearly, minimizing communication noise, and taking advantage of feedback to clarify confusing messages.

Formal communication networks—which can be pictured in flowcharts and organizational charts—are management's way of establishing what it believes are necessary relationships among people within an organization. Formal communication flows in several directions: downward from superiors to subordinates, upward from subordinates to superiors, and horizontally among people of equal rank. Formal communication structures are necessary as a business grows and its tasks become more complex, but they must be handled carefully to avoid problems.

Unlike formal relationships, informal communication networks consist of interaction patterns that are not designed by management. Informal networks can be based on physical proximity, shared career interests, or personal friendships. An informal network can be quite small or a large grapevine that connects many people. Informal networks serve many purposes: they can confirm, expand upon, expedite, contradict, circumvent, or supplement formal messages. Because these functions are so useful, it is important to cultivate and use informal contacts within an organization.

In business, communicators can exchange messages via a number of channels, some oral and others written. The channel used to deliver a message can have a strong influence on its effectiveness. Each channel has both advantages and drawbacks. The best choice in a given situation depends primarily on the nature of the message and the desired relationship between the sender and receiver.

key terms

channel   8
chronological context   10
communication network   14
computer conferencing   30
content message   11
context   10
cultural context   10
decoding   8
downward communication   15
electronic mail (e-mail)   28
encoding   8
external noise   9
feedback   8
formal communication network   14
horizontal (lateral) communication   19
informal communication network   20
instant messaging   30
intranet   29

lateral communication   19
medium   8
message   8
networking   22
noise   9
organizational chart   15
physical context   9
physical noise   9
physiological noise   9
psychological noise   9
receiver   8
relational message   11
sender   7
social context   10
teleconferencing   26
upward communication   17
voice mail   27

resources

Eisenberg, E. M., and H. L. Goodall, Jr. "The Changing World of Work" and "Relational Contexts for Organizational Communication." In *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint,* 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, chapters 1 and 9.

> This excellent text on organizational communication begins by illustrating how changing values and priorities in people's lives lead to shifts in how they view their work and their work relationships. Chapter 8 expands the notion of the changing contexts of work relationships, including ideas for communicating with superiors, subordinates, peers, and customers and avoiding some pitfalls of intimacy in office relationships.

Krackhard, D., and J. R. Hanson. "Informal Networks: The Company behind the Chart." *Harvard Business Review* 71 (July 1993), pp. 104–11.

The cross-functional and cross-divisional informal networks in a company often bear little resemblance to formal organizational charts. Yet understanding these informal networks is a key to understanding who really talks to, advises, and trusts others. This article demonstrates how managers can understand various informal networks—advice networks, trust networks, and communication networks—and how this knowledge of networks can be applied to solve some organizational problems and encourage more cooperative and productive interactions.

Misner, Ivan R., and Don Moyer. *Masters of Networking: Building Relationships for Your Pocketbook and Soul.* Atlanta: Bard Press, 2000.

> This book is a well-organized compilation of articles by over 80 master networkers including Bill Gates, John Naisbitt, and Susan

RoAne. The chapters describe networking and networking skills, characteristics of successful networkers, and self-assessments of your networking style. The premise is that in networking givers gain and that those who create, sustain, and serve networks experience personal and professional benefits.

Nicoll, David C. "Acknowledge and Use Your Grapevine." *Management Decision* 32 (1994), pp. 25–30.

This article gives a thorough and clear explanation of the functions and value of informal communication networks within organizations. It explains that the "grapevine" complements, rather than conflicts with, formal communication channels.

Ober, S. "Using Technology to Access and Share Information." In *Contemporary Business Communication,* 3d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998, chapter 3.

This very comprehensive chapter identifies major types of electronic information and tools and promotes strategies for successfully using them. Additionally, the author de-

scribes ways to browse and search the Internet and World Wide Web as well as ways to evaluate the information found there.

Schultz, Heidi. *The Elements of Electronic Communication.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.

This short, practical book provides examples of effective and ineffective messages and samples from government, business, and nonprofit contexts. Its focus is on appropriate content as well as format and organization of messages.

Vesper, J., and V. R. Ruggiero. "Communicating Electronically." In *Contemporary Business Communication: From Thought to Expression.* New York: HarperCollins, 1993, chapter 16.

This chapter catalogs numerous new technological tools available to the contemporary business communicator. The authors address the pros and cons (or advantages and disadvantages) of the multitude of tools and follow that with a discussion of three common results of all of this new technology: feeling overwhelmed, overloaded, or overconfident. The chapter concludes with practical advice for meeting these challenges.

activities

1. Invitation to Insight

Think about a situation you have experienced in which communication went wrong. Diagnose the problem by finding the parts of the communication process that contributed to the trouble:

a. *Sender* Did the wrong person *send* the message?
b. *Message* Was the message unclear? Were there too many messages?
c. *Channel* Was the most appropriate channel chosen?
d. *Receiver* Was there no receiver at all? Was the message poorly formulated for the person(s) at whom it was aimed? Was it received by the wrong person?
e. *Feedback* Was feedback adequate to ensure understanding?
f. *Noise* Did external, physiological, or psychological noise distort the message?

2. Skill Builder

Develop your skill at cultivating informal communication networks by following these instructions:

a. Choose one of the following information goals, or identify a school- or work-related goal of your own.
   1. Identify which instructors and/or courses in an academic department of your institution are worth seeking out and which should be avoided.
   2. Define which qualities the management in a given organization values in employees.
   3. Identify computer users you know to determine which software program best suits your needs for a given application (e.g., word processing, database) and context (e.g., customer tracking, report writing).

b.   Identify the people who can help you ac-
quire the information you are seeking. Be
sure to seek out people from a variety of
positions within the organization to gain
the most complete perspective.

3. Skill Builder

Use the information on pages 24–33 to decide which
communication channel is best for each message:

a.   Complaining to your boss about a difficult
co-worker.
b.   Asking for a few days of leave from work
to attend a special reunion.
c.   Training a new employee to operate a
complicated computer program.
d.   Notifying the manager of a local business
that you still haven't received the refund
you were promised.
e.   Reminding your busy boss about a long
overdue reimbursement for out-of-pocket
expenses.

f.   Apologizing to a customer for a mistake
your company made.
g.   Getting your boss's reaction to the idea of
giving you more responsibility.

4. Invitation to Insight

Browse the table of contents of one of these books
online: Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Commu-
nity: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* at
http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/ or Steven L.
Telleen's *Intranet Organization: Strategies for Manag-
ing Change* at **http://www.brint.com/Intranets.htm.**
Choose one chapter to read in its entirety.

a.   Write a paragraph summary of the chapter
and its relationship to topics covered in
this chapter of the text.
b.   Describe the impact of reading and learn-
ing online for you. In what way does the
channel affect the message?