1 Getting Started

Group Skills Preview

In this chapter, you will learn to do the following:

- *Name the characteristics essential for defining a group*
- *Describe the task and relational dimensions of group activities*
- *Recognize and use the unique communication opportunities of being in a group*
- *Recognize and eliminate physical and psychological noise from group conversations*

As you embark on the study of group communication by reading this book and taking this course, you are entering both familiar and uncharted territory. The focus of your study will be familiar because you have been a member of many groups—groups of people with whom you live and play; with whom you work, or whom you manage, or supervise; and with whom you celebrate life. Yet each group is a puzzle waiting to be solved.

Your Experience with Groups

You have always belonged to groups. You have lived and played in groups—your family, your classmates, sports teams, clubs, church groups. You have worked in groups, and you have socialized in groups. Some of your groups have focused on decision making and problem solving; others have focused on social activities or entertainment. Although some of the groups were fun, supportive, successful, and/or effective, others were boring, hostile, unproductive, and/or ineffective. At some point, the groups to which you have belonged experienced disagreement or conflict that contrasted to the groups that were full of laughter and positive results.

What's your attitude toward groups? You have had many group experiences and are familiar with how groups operate. What ideas and attitudes do you have about groups based on your experiences? Some of your memories may be negative: the family event that ended with everyone frustrated and angry, or the civics classroom group that couldn't present its project because certain members didn't do their part. Other groups may have been more positive: the committee that had so much fun decorating for the dance, or the ecology club that earned recognition for cleaning up trails in the park. Often, however, negative memories outweigh

positive ones. If this is the case for you, you may have a pessimistic attitude toward groups and try to avoid them whenever possible.

People in groups complete activities together and create relationships with one another. This book examines groups in the broadest terms, looking at both the processes of problem solving and decision making and the development of relationships. It will help you understand your previous group experiences and reconsider some of your attitudes and ideas. It will also help you improve existing group skills and develop new ones.

One group is never exactly like another. You can't predict other group members' behavior, nor can you control how other members will react to you. Thus, as a member of a group, you are always entering uncharted territory. Regardless of the many factors that may be the same from one group to the next, just one significant difference creates a new and unique group experience.

For example, consider a group of co-workers who effectively solve problems on the job and decide to get together for a relaxed dinner at one member's home. When everyone arrives, the team's leader takes over, organizing and directing the group's social activities. She may think she's merely doing her part, but the other group members are both offended and astonished that she feels a need to manage the group in this social setting. Back at work, the harmony of the group is now disrupted as previously effective task and social roles are confused. Or consider some neighbors who walk their dogs together every morning and who then form a book club. They now have to decide when and where to meet and how to select a book every month. Their previously harmonious interactions are disrupted by conflicting expectations, desires, tastes, and styles. An obvious solution may seem to be not to mix task and social groups. But in our complex society, we often find that relationships developed in one context extend to other settings; thus people in one part of our lives may show up as group members somewhere else.

You cannot avoid groups. Regardless of your experiences with and feelings about groups, it is unlikely that you will be able to avoid participating in them. In fact, our society is becoming increasingly reliant on groups. Although individuality is emphasized in U.S. culture, we are expected to interact in groups as part of the social fabric of families and other living arrangements. The effective interaction of groups is the foundation of our government at the local, state, and federal level. Group structures are often the basis of the organizations on which we depend for economic survival, as well as for our goods and services. As you progress through organizational hierarchies, you'll both participate in and manage groups. In fact, the more professional responsibility you have, the less you will work on your own and the more you will interact with or manage groups or teams.

The objective of this book is to help you "read" the groups or teams of which you are a member or for which you are responsible. By being able to analyze group activities, the interactions among members, and the environment in which a group operates, you will discover what's unique about a particular group and what are the most effective ways to participate in the group and help it accomplish its activities.

As Figure 1.1 illustrates, you may have certain kinds of group interaction knowledge and skills but be deficient in others. Several features in this book can help you improve your repertoire of group skills. To help you become more sensitive to the many factors that inhibit or facilitate group interaction, the book contains many *Mastering Group Skills* and *Evaluating Group Success* boxes that focus your attention on a specific group issue and gauge the effectiveness of your group experiences. Also interspersed throughout the book are brief stopping points called *Putting the Pieces Together* to help you quickly identify group problems that occur when five basic group principles are violated. (In this chapter, these group principles are introduced in the box "Laying out the Pieces of the Puzzle.") As you encounter new material, you will see how it relates to these five basic group issues. In addition, *Skill Builder* exercises identify a critical group skill and provide some suggestions for building or developing that skill. At the end of each chapter is a set of questions to guide your reflections about your group experiences.

Groups are like individuals—no two are alike. The better equipped you are to analyze what is happening in and around the group, the more successful and satisfying your group experiences will be. To guide you through your investigation of group communication, this book is organized into four parts.

The first part—Chapters 1–4—describes basic communication concepts as they apply to groups or teams. By increasing your ability to send and receive messages effectively and to help a group develop its structure, you will have accomplished the first step to achieving more effective group participation. These chapters also explore the types of task groups you are likely to encounter. Although it may seem obvious that group members must know what their task is and how to accomplish it, group members frequently assume they know what the group is supposed to do without getting verbal consensus or commitment from

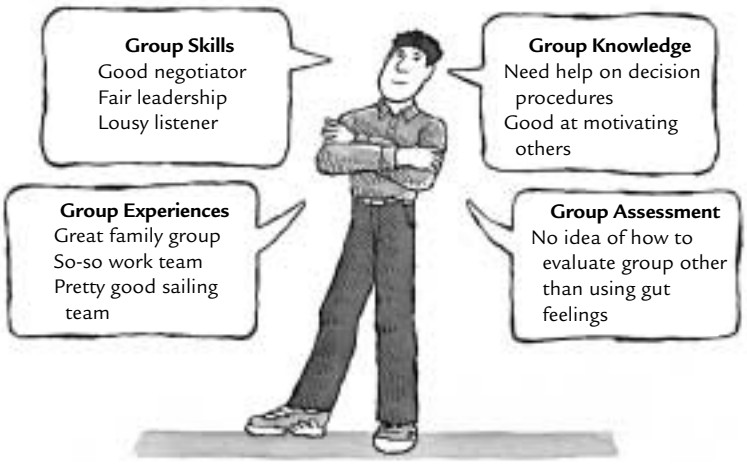


Figure 1.1 You may be good at some aspects of group communication but poor at others.

other group members. Learning to assess the group's task or activity will help you decide which interactive processes will be most productive for your group.

The second part of the book—Chapters 5–7—focuses on the communication processes among group members upon which group relationships depend. Your competence as a communicator helps you establish relationships with group members who are different from you.

The third part of the book—Chapters 8–11—focuses on group interaction opportunities and problems that surface regularly. Bringing individuals together creates a natural opportunity for differences to occur. These differences can benefit or harm the group. Increasing your skills in decision making, problem solving, leadership, and conflict management will help you maximize your group interaction efforts.

Despite all the research on group interaction, there is no blueprint for group success. What works in one group situation fails in another. Moreover, what works at one point in time may not work later as relationships among group members mature or the group takes on different tasks or activities. Thus the fourth part of the book—Chapters 12 and 13—covers meeting management and facilitation skills, and discusses techniques for providing feedback to the group. Whether or not you are the leader of a group, if you recognize group interaction patterns and know how to help a group stay or get back on track, you will be a valuable group member. Thus it is important that you learn to analyze the group task, environment, members, and interaction. Armed with more than just a gut feeling, you will make better choices about which group skills to use.

There are no magic formulas for group interaction or set procedures that work in each group setting. Each group is different, so your approach to each group must differ as well. This book is a guide for your exploration of groups, based on theory and research studies. Theories from a range of disciplines including communication, counseling, management, and psychology provide frameworks that both describe and explain group interaction. From these theoretical foundations, we can identify the skills needed for effective and successful group interaction. By developing your group communication skills, you will be able to develop practical and viable solutions to the group interaction problems you encounter.

What Is a Group?

Through your experiences, you probably already have your own definition of a group. However, you may have overlooked a few of the critical elements that differentiate group communication from other communication contexts. So, although you may have great familiarity with groups, you may not know the defining characteristics of a group. Are two people having dinner together a group? What about five people waiting for a bus on a street corner? or 50,000 fans in a football stadium? And what about your favorite chat room on the Internet? How exactly is a group differentiated from other forms or contexts of interaction?

Characteristics for Defining a Group

Five characteristics are central to the definition of groups: group size, interdependence of members, group identity, group goal, and group structure. In addition to defining what a group is, these characteristics are a good place to start in understanding how members of a group interact effectively. These characteristics can help you isolate group interaction problems and understand why they develop. As you read in more detail about each of the characteristics, you will come to understand why a **group** is defined as three or more people who work together interdependently on an agreed-upon activity or goal. They identify themselves as members of the group, and they develop structure and roles, based on norms and rules, as they interact and work toward their goal.

Group Size One of the primary characteristics of a group is **group size.** The minimum number of members in a group is three; the maximum number depends on the other characteristics, discussed shortly. Early in the study of group interaction, many researchers examined **dyadic interaction,** or interaction between two people (a dyad). In the communication discipline, this form of interaction is now regarded as interpersonal interaction.

The interaction of three people differs significantly from the interaction of two, because the introduction of the third person sets up the opportunity to form coalitions. As an example, **coalition formation** occurs when one member takes sides with another against a third member of the group. This type of 2-to-1 subgrouping creates an imbalance of power, one that can only occur when at least three group members are present. A coalition creates interaction dynamics that cannot occur with two people.

Introducing a third group member also allows hidden communication to take place. These hidden interactions are often attempts to build alliances, which underscores the role of relationship building as groups work on tasks. For example, let's say that Nancy and Michelle meet on their way to a group meeting; Jeff is waiting for them in the conference room. Nancy takes this opportunity to brief Michelle on the background of the project and to give her evaluation of her previous interactions with Jeff. Jeff does not have access to this hidden interaction, but Nancy's musings to Michelle will certainly affect the interaction among these group members. In this case, there was no strategic attempt to manipulate Jeff, but Nancy and Michelle's interaction still affected the group. Naturally, the larger the group, the more these hidden interactions are likely to occur.

The size of a group has an impact not only on how members interact with one another but also on how roles are assumed (or assigned) within the group and how interactions are regulated during group meetings. On the one hand, it may be more difficult for members of larger groups to decide who takes what role because many members may have the skills necessary for various roles. Also, larger groups typically have more difficulty in scheduling time to interact. On the other hand, members of smaller groups may find that no one in the group possesses a critical

skill or certain knowledge essential to the group's activity. You may be thinking that smaller groups are preferable because fewer interaction problems arise, but artificially limiting the size of the group forces more responsibility on each member. Thus group size is more appropriately fixed by the group's task.

However, research has demonstrated that increased size can produce diminishing returns. In other words, bigger isn't always better (Bettenhausen, 1991; Hare, 1982; Wheelan & McKeage, 1993). Although the addition of group members can expand the pool of skills and talents from which to choose, it can also increase problems with coordination and motivation. There is a point at which groups become too large and members become dissatisfied, feel less group cohesion, and perceive less identification with the group. Why? The larger the group, the fewer opportunities each member has to talk, and as group size increases, what the group can achieve decreases because of the logistical problems in coordinating so many people. Thus increased group size affects group productivity because members have less opportunity to participate. Because of their size, large groups require more attention to group norms and group roles. Even more problematic is the fact that group members are more likely to accept the illusion that someone else is responsible for accomplishing the group's task and so fail to do their own part. As a result, there are greater demands on group leadership in large groups. But large groups can be effective—if the goal is clearly identified for all group members, if members share a consensus about the goal, and if they recognize and fulfill their roles.

Clearly, groups need to be the appropriate size to effectively complete the task or activity before them. Three members may be too few for a complex task or goal. When there are too few members and there is too much work to do, group members are likely to become frustrated, and even angry, about the task and toward the group. Relationships also are affected by group size. Twenty members are probably too many to deliberate on a problem and make recommendations in one written report. When group members feel as if they are not needed to produce the group's outcome, or if their individual efforts are not recognized, they become apathetic and feel distant from the group. This form of detachment is known as **social loafing** (Comer, 1995). Thus **social loafers** are group members who do not perform to their maximum level of potential contribution. Rather, they use the other group members as a shield they can hide behind and still reap the same benefits as other group members who work to make the group a success. The opportunity for social loafing increases as the size of the group increases.

Although some groups and teams (juries, sports teams) have specific size limits or standards, other groups (work groups) can be designed with size in mind. Research has demonstrated that the optimum group size is five. Members of five-person groups generally are more satisfied with the experience and believe that they have adequate opportunities to talk in the group. Having too few members may make members feel pressured into talking; having too many members decreases the opportunity to participate. An odd number of members is also preferred for decision-making groups to avoid a deadlock. You can probably see that, although we identify the minimum number of members of a group, the maximum

number depends on the other four characteristics. Rather than limiting group membership to some arbitrary number, we need to consider issues such as task complexity and interaction opportunities to identify the appropriate number of group members.

Interdependence of Members A second critical characteristic of a group is the interdependence of group members. **Interdependence** means that both group and individual outcomes are influenced by what other group members do (Brewer, 1995). Members must rely on and cooperate with one another to complete the group activity, because they are attempting to accomplish something that would be difficult or impossible for one individual to achieve. Through their interdependence, group members mutually influence one another.

For example, members of a softball team are a group. It's impossible to play effectively without a catcher, pitcher, and shortstop. Each member of the softball team fills a specific role that functions interdependently with those of other players. Moreover, how well one player fulfills his or her role affects how another player responds and fulfills his or her role. Even if the team has one outstanding hitter, the team will not win very often without members who specialize in defense. Not only do these team members have to fulfill their specialized roles and depend on one another, but they have to communicate with one another, both verbally and nonverbally. It is not enough to identify the necessary roles and to assign members to them; the individuals in these roles have to be actively engaged and interacting with one another.

As another example, consider a project team at a computer company that has been given the task of developing a new software program. This task can be seen as a **superordinate goal**—that is, a task or goal that is so complex, difficult, or time-consuming that it is beyond the capacity of one person. The team, however, brings together several people with a variety of strengths and skills. Team members are interdependent as they share ideas in the early stages of the project; later they can test various ideas with one another before engaging expensive resources. Such interdependence is likely to save their organization time, energy, effort, and money; it is also likely to create a better software program.

The communication within groups also illustrates the interdependence of group members. Let's look at a student group concerned about course and faculty evaluations. Jennetta asks the group to think of ways to improve the evaluation process. Her question prompts group members to respond with ideas that she writes on the board. When they finish, Jerome comments about one trend he sees in the list. Sara asks him to elaborate. As Jerome and Sara continue their conversation, Jennetta circles the ideas they are talking about and links them together while she gives affirming nods to indicate that they should continue. Pamela, who said very little during the idea generation process, now says, "But the ideas you are circling are ones we as students can do little about. What about working through student government to develop an independent evaluation process that could be published in the student newspaper? Student government set up its own book co-op in spite of opposition from the administration." Jennetta, Jerome, and Sara

Normally, when we think of groups, we think of formal work teams like those in organizations that make decisions and solve problems (top). Likewise, sports teams are groups that play together, usually under the direction of a group leader—the coach (bottom).

turn to Pamela expectantly. Their silence encourages Pamela to continue talking: "What I'm saying is that the ideas on the board are attempts to fix a system that is not under our control. So, why not develop an independent system that students control?" Jerome replies enthusiastically, "Great idea, Pam . . . Do you mind if I call you Pam?"

Notice how the verbal and nonverbal messages in this group depend on one another to make sense. Jennetta first invites members' participation, and they all generate ideas. The list they generate motivates Jerome to make an analytical comment, which is further encouraged by Sara's question. Although Pamela initially says little, her action has an impact on other group members' communication by giving Jerome and Sara more opportunities to talk. Jennetta's nonverbal messages further contribute to Pamela's silence as she acknowledges Jerome and Sara, and not Pamela. Pamela's interjection into the conversation startles the others, and their conversation stops. Her acute observation reminds them that she has not been ignoring what's going on; rather, her assessment helps them see that they may be wasting their time.

In this example, the communication itself was interdependent. One statement can only make sense when it is placed before and after other strings of the conversation. Each individual in the group is influenced by what others say (and don't say). The group's success depends on the extent to which the verbal and nonverbal messages make sense together.

Group Identity A third defining characteristic for a group is group identity. Group members must know and act as if they are members of this particular group. In essence, **group identity** means that individuals identify themselves with other group members and the group goal. Group identity is fully achieved when members behave as a group, believe they belong to a group, and come to like the group—both its members and its tasks (Henry, Arrow, & Carini, 1999). Without this type of identification, group focus and interdependence will weaken.

Unfortunately, many times people are identified as a group when they have little or no expectation that group interaction will occur. Such gatherings or collections of people are more appropriately called **groupings.** Throughout our lives, we are constantly identified by the groupings people assign to us. For example, I live in Memphis, I am female, I have two Dalmatians as pets, and I drive a Sebring. But being identified according to these categories does not necessarily place me in interaction with others as a group member or cause me to be interdependent with anyone else. These categories make it easier to identify who I am, but they do not in any way make me part of an interacting group. At the same time, individuals may join particular groups because they want to be identified as members of the group (for example, a fraternity, sorority, or community chorus). But doing so will not result in group interaction opportunities unless the individuals are motivated to talk to others.

Remember that, just because individuals have some reason to be together or some surface connection seems to exist among them, true group interaction may not occur. Simply being identified with others who share similar characteristics

doesn't create the "groupness" element of the identity concept. However, when group members identify with one another and the group's goal, they adopt the norms and values of the group, increasing group members' ability to work together effectively.

Group Goal Identity, then, is a necessary but not sufficient characteristic for a group. We also need a fourth characteristic: group goal. A **group goal** is an agreed-upon task or activity that the group is to complete or accomplish. This goal may be long term and process-oriented (such as a family functioning as a social and economic unit), or it may be short term with specific boundaries and parameters (for example, a church group holding a car wash to raise money). Regardless of the duration or type of goal, group members must agree on the group's goal to be effective (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). That does not mean that all group members have to like the goal, but it does mean that there is clarity on what the goal is and that it is perceived by members as being worthwhile.

Having a group goal gives the group direction and provides members with motivation for completing their tasks. A group's goal should be cooperative. This means that, as one member moves toward goal attainment, so do other group members. A group goal is cooperative when it integrates the self-interests of all group members. Groups that are having trouble have often lost sight of their goals—sometimes because of distractions and other times because of external forces (such as other people or a change in deadline or objectives). Groups that cannot identify why they exist and what they are trying to achieve are doomed to failure.

For example, as a student in the class for which you are reading this textbook, your goal is probably to get a good grade. But getting a good grade is your individual goal, not a group goal. Each student in the class may have the same goal, but it is not a shared, consensual goal that motivates interaction and activity. If it were, everything you did in preparation for class would be designed to help you, as well as other students, achieve the "good grade" goal. Thus agreement on a common goal among individuals, not similarity in individual goals, defines individuals as members of the same group. Group goals create cooperation whereas individual goals often create competition.

Group Structure The final defining characteristic of a group is its structure. Whether informal (a group of friends) or formal (a parent-teacher organization), some type of structure must develop. **Group structure** tends to develop along with, or to emerge from, group rules and **norms**—patterns of behavior that others come to expect and rely on. Let's say Pat, Emily, Donna, and Greg meet for social activities every Friday night. If the group does not set plans for the next week, Pat takes it upon himself to call everyone to get suggestions. No one has appointed him to this role; he does it naturally in reaction to the other group members' lack of initiative. Pat has assumed the role of the group's social organizer, and the group has come to depend on him to play that role. His role playing has created a certain structure in the group, and that structure has become a norm.

In more formal settings, a group may elect someone to record what happens in the meetings as a way of tracking the group's progress and keeping an account of details. Again, the person taking on the recorder or secretary role is providing structure for the group, as well as behaving in a normative pattern. Thus both the recorder's actions and the record of the meeting provide structure for the group. Anytime a group member takes on a formal or informal role, group structure is created. Likewise, any discussion or outcome that provides direction for the group is considered group structure. Suppose your family decides to visit Disneyland on vacation. That decision creates structure for your future family discussions because now your interactions will center around the logistics of traveling to California and planning your vacation.

To be viable, groups must have some form of structure, but the structure does not have to remain constant throughout the life of the group. Much of a group's structure is provided by the **group roles,** or the functions group members assume through their interactions. But like group structure, roles are not necessarily fixed. Formal roles—those filled through appointment, assignment, or election—are likely to be more permanent. Informal roles—functions that emerge spontaneously from the group's interaction (such as the group member who eases tension in the group)—will change as the talents of group members become apparent or are needed by others.

Some families interact as groups, making decisions about weekend activities, planning vacations and holiday activities, and celebrating significant achievements of family members.

To summarize: We have defined a group as three or more people who work together interdependently on an agreed-upon activity or goal. They identify themselves as members of the group, and they develop structure and roles, based on norms and rules, as they interact and work toward their goal.

Your family may have been your first group according to the characteristics we've established. If your family had a family council in which all members participated to help establish family norms and rules or to decide how to spend family time (vacations, weekends), then your family was a group. Unfortunately, many families today are simply groupings. There may be group moments when family members come together and take on the characteristics identified earlier (for example, at the dinner table when everyone sits down to discuss a common topic and the conversation results in a consensual decision), but for the most part they remain groupings, failing to achieve the reality and potential of true group interaction.

Due to the defining characteristics of groups, each group takes on a life of its own. Each is unique. What we as individuals bring to group interactions is a unique compilation of all our past group experiences, good and bad (McCanne, 1977). Your set of expectations resembles no one else's set of expectations, and members of the same group bring different expectations to the same group experience. As a result, we live in a world of constant ebb and flow of group interactions in our personal, social, and professional lives that overlap and affect one another. It is to our benefit to understand these interactions and our ability to influence them. Not only are our groups charged with completing tasks and activities: they also provide us with opportunities to develop and maintain relationships, to learn about ourselves, and to enhance our personal and professional skills. And all of this is accomplished through communication. "Laying out the Pieces of the Puzzle," on pages 14 and 15, illustrates how the five elements that define groups can help you determine whether a group is effective.

How Do Groups Communicate?

This is a simple question, but the answer is quite complicated because at any one time there is not merely a single communication system within a group. First, let's examine a simple communication model. Then we will apply it to a group.

A Basic Communication Model

Communication models identify the sender, the receiver, and the message as the most fundamental elements. The **sender** is the source of a **message,** or information, which is sent through verbal, nonverbal, written, or electronic channels to the **receiver.** The message, however, is not always transmitted or received with the meaning intended by the sender. **Physical noise** (for example, a construction crew working just outside the building) or **psychological noise** (trying to remember what your mother asked you to get at the store) can distort the message for either the sender or the receiver—and sometimes both. For example, Jason is trying to tell Becky about his ideas for the picnic they are planning. But just as he

launches into his description, his beeper goes off, and he glances down to find out who is calling. Becky, who dislikes the interruptions of beepers, starts to wonder how reliable Jason will be in planning the picnic. She thinks, "If he is rude enough to let a beeper interrupt our conversation, will he listen when the deli manager gives him quotes for food?" In this very short transaction, there is both physical noise (the beeper) and psychological noise (Becky's attitude toward the intrusion and Jason's attention to the caller). And when Jason and Becky resume their conversation, the interaction environment has been changed by their previous attempt to talk about the picnic and the interruption. Noise causes distortion in most sender-receiver interactions and is a primary cause of ineffective communication. Although the noise described in this example is rather severe, some level of noise affects most interactions. Sender and receiver rarely give each other 100 percent of their attention.

When we consider the interaction of the group, we need to notice several interaction tendencies that can further distort the communication process and ultimately affect the message that the receiver hears or sees. One tendency in groups is for people to talk over one another. This can happen when members want to make sure they're heard or when they have great enthusiasm for their group activity. Another tendency is for several conversations to occur at once. These "side conversations" can occur when friends sit side by side and use the group meeting as an opportunity to catch up with each other. They can also occur when group members are disinterested in the conversation or unmotivated to participate. Feeling as if the conversation has little to do with them, several group members may start discussing another topic. Now the group is split into two separate discussions. When this occurs, members do not have access to both conversations. Thus time is wasted, and information intended for everyone is received by only part of the group's membership. Both types of side conversation create additional physical noise that may prevent a receiver from hearing a sender. Moreover, both tendencies are likely to create psychological noise (for instance, negative attitudes) for at least some of the group members, further distorting the interaction.

Thus groups need to take special precautions against distortion in messages. To be interdependent and to share an understanding of the group's goal, all group members need to hear what is being said and to discuss their interpretations of it. Too frequently, group leaders use meetings to provide information (send messages), leaving little time for other group members to respond or ask questions. This introduces another component of the group communication model—**feedback.** Without this opportunity to ask questions, to restate the message in the receiver's own words, or to overtly agree or disagree with the message sent, the sender cannot be certain that other group members received the message intended. Feedback is critical in group settings because of the many interaction opportunities that exist.

A basic model of communication comprises a sender as the source transmitting a message through one or more channels (verbal, nonverbal, written, or electronic) to the receiver. The sender acknowledges the feedback of the receiver and is aware that both physical and psychological noise are present in the interaction. But, to better represent the process of communicating in groups, we need to think of each

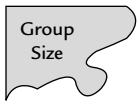
PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Laying out the Pieces of the Puzzle

The five characteristics that define groups—group size, interdependence, group identity, group goal, and group structure—can provide a foundation for analyzing the effectiveness of a group. The following exercise will lead you through this analysis.

The Group and Its Interaction

Like most students assigned a group project, Gayle, Rebecca, Sean, Jim, and Sonya wait too long to begin work on their assignment. Now, pressed for time, each member has other obligations and, quite frankly, more pressing interests and motivations. Still, the group has to produce what the professor expected in order to receive 20 percent of their course grade. Meeting once to get organized, Rebecca, Sean, Jim, and Sonya each assume responsibility for one area of the project, and Gayle agrees to take responsibility for integrating these parts. The group gives itself 2 weeks before reconvening to turn in finished materials to Gayle, who will pull it all together before its oral presentation to the class. Due to the members' late start, there will be only a few days between the group's second meeting and the oral presentation, putting extreme pressure on Gayle to integrate the project's parts and get it back to the other members so they can perform effectively during the presentation. These members are juniors and seniors, and they have done this type of group project many times in the past. They know they can pull it off.



This group has five members. Deciding to separate responsibilities into four distinct parts and one integration role makes sense if there are four major parts of the topic or project to be researched. Or does it? What other factors might come into play? Does it make sense to have one person be responsible for integrating the results of the others' work?

The group decides to break up the task into distinct parts. This seems reasonable given their tight deadline. Or does it? As Sean completes his research, his findings might impact the research of others. What other interdependence issues might arise? Think about the lack of interdependence in coordinating the research and then forcing interdependence in the

person in the communication opportunity as being both sender and receiver. Consider this short exchange among Jarrod, Angel, and Malcolm:

JARROD: I think we should consider his past performance.

ANGEL: Performance at school or performance on the job?

JARROD: Probably only his job skills.

ANGEL: Why? His ability to do well at school would tell us if he can learn quickly and make adjustments to conflicting demands on his time.

MALCOLM: Let's just interview him, and get this over with!

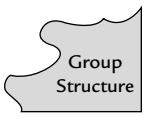
In this short exchange, Jarrod and Angel identified different issues they wanted to bring before the group. Jarrod initiated their interaction, but because feedback occurred, Angel also became a sender when she initially disagreed with Jarrod's proposal. As Angel explained why she disagreed, she became the sender and Jarrod

continued

oral presentation. Is the class project a superordinate group goal? What supports your argument?

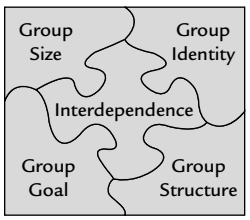
How do these group members identify with one another? What steps can they take to enhance their group identity? As the leader of the group, what can Jim do to enhance the group's identity? Or do they need a group identity, given their limited time for interaction?

What are the boundaries or parameters of the group's goal? The goal was given to the group by someone external to the group. How will this affect group members' perceptions of the goal? The goal is primarily task-oriented. What relationship elements does the group need to consider to successfully complete the assignment?



This group appears to have developed some type of structure and identified functional roles (four researchers and one integrator of the material). Are these the only work roles the group needs to consider? Is the structure developed useful for the project? Might individual group members bring differing group norms from past experiences into this interaction and inhibit the group's effectiveness?

Putting the Pieces Together



Using the five defining characteristics of a group can help you understand what factors may be inhibiting your group. Which part of this group's puzzle is strongest? weakest? most critical to the group? If you were in charge of this group, which element would you work on first? Knowing, for example, that identity is weak in your group, you might want to suggest that group members spend some time getting to know one another before beginning work on the task. Or, if the group goal is not clear and agreed upon by everyone, it will be helpful to spend a few minutes talking specifically about what the group is trying to accomplish. When one or several of the defining characteristics are weak or missing, the sense of "groupness" may be too fragile for the individuals to function effectively as a group.

became a receiver, while Malcolm became another receiver for both of them. This fluidity between sender and receiver roles is further heightened when you consider that as Angel explained why she disagreed Malcolm was sending nonverbal cues to which both Angel and Jarrod reacted. Thus the **transactional** model of communication for the group context (see Figure 1.2) emphasizes that messages are being simultaneously sent and received among all group members as they create mutual meaning and understanding.

This brief example demonstrates that group conversations are **multichannel** because group members make use of both verbal and nonverbal messages. Sometimes a written or electronic channel, such as writing on the board or e-mail, is used in addition to the verbal and nonverbal channels. Also, notice that both the verbal and nonverbal channels are used simultaneously. This is especially important in group interaction because we interpret much of what others are saying by paying attention to their facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. For example, Angel

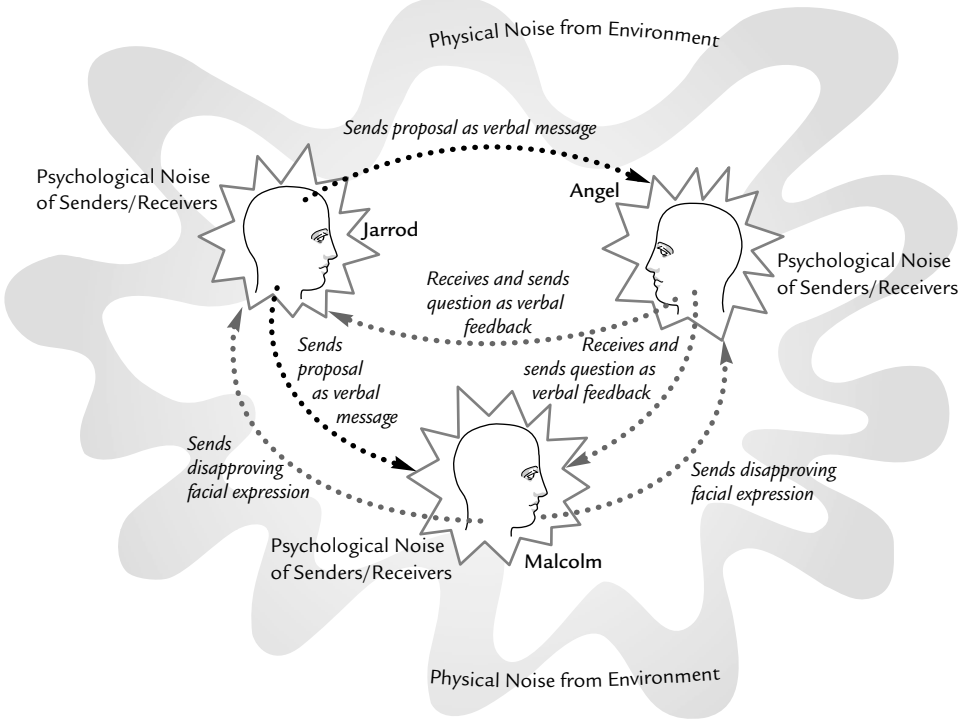


Figure 1.2 *Transactional Model of Communication*

can tell that Jarrod is serious—his words indicate this, and his tone reinforces it. This channel is also important in group interaction because we pay attention to the nonverbal cues of other members while listening to messages sent by the member who is talking.

In this example, notice how the group members questioned the meaning of "performance." Groups must work to create mutual understanding because each group member may have a different interpretation of a word or phrase and because each member may create a different understanding of what has been said. For instance, do you believe that the three group members had a common understanding of the phrase "past performance"? If the group stopped right now and reviewed the applicant's performance, would each member be evaluating the same thing?

Also note that modeling communication in this way demonstrates that communication is a **process,** without clearly marked beginnings and endings. Did Jarrod, Angel, and Malcolm start communicating when Jarrod spoke, or was it when the three group members became aware of one another's nonverbal messages? Because communication is a process, it is also difficult to determine when the disagreement started. Did it start with Angel's first question, Jarrod's response, or Angel's second question? As a process, communication is ongoing and continuous, dynamic and ever changing. This specific communication event also will affect

other communication events. That is, the disagreement expressed in this meeting will likely influence the group's future conversations.

You can see, then, that the many opportunities for interaction within a group complicate the communication process. It is likely that multiple messages are being sent and received at the same time within any group setting. Even when Jarrod is the only person talking, other group members are sending nonverbal messages, which act as feedback. This feedback can be directed to Jarrod, in which case it will affect what he continues to say or how he delivers the next part of his message. Nonverbal feedback among other group members while Jarrod is talking will also affect how other group members hear and receive messages from Jarrod.

What Do Groups Do?

Groups have many interaction opportunities. This is the primary reason a group can do a variety of things. Some groups are focused on a task, such as winning a basketball game, registering first-time voters, or making recommendations to increase sales. Other groups are more socially or entertainment focused—for example, support groups that help members with their weight loss and exercise plans or groups of friends who meet regularly to play cards.

The **task dimension** of a group refers to what the group does, whether it is called a task, an activity, or a goal. To help a group accomplish its task, group members must have technical requirements, or the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to perform the activities of the group. Yet even groups with a strong task focus must also pay attention to the relationships that develop among group members. The **relational dimension** of a group refers to the social and emotional support group members provide for one another, as well as a mechanism for developing and maintaining role identities.

All groups have both task and relational dimensions. Even groups that are primarily social or relational have some task to perform. In these types of groups, the task may be as simple as members being there for one another, or it may be more specific, such as providing a place for members to explore their feelings. Regardless of a group's primary focus, both task and social dimensions are present, and they are inseparably interdependent (Fisher, 1971).

This two-dimensional aspect of groups is important because a group that concentrates solely on work without attending to its members' social or relational needs becomes boring and ineffective. Likewise, a group that focuses solely on having a good time can become tiresome if that social interaction does not lead to new information or provide opportunities to perform meaningful activities. The most effective groups are those that keep each of these dimensions in balance relative to the activity at hand.

Satisfying Task and Relational Dimensions

Some groups form deliberately; others emerge from spontaneous interaction. When groups form deliberately (for example, work groups), someone decides that

a collection of individuals should accomplish a purpose or goal. Most problem-solving or decision-making groups (such as city councils) and social action groups (for instance, Mothers Against Drunk Driving) are examples of deliberately formed groups—it would be impossible for fewer people to accomplish their goals.

Other groups form spontaneously. Generally, individuals come together in these groups because of the satisfaction they expect to gain from associating with one another. A group of friends at work is a good example of a spontaneous group. In these cases, group membership is by mutual consent—each member wants to be in the group, and each is accepted as a group member. Typically, these groups form when individuals communicate frequently and voluntarily with one another. Thus group membership is based on attraction.

If a group is deliberately formed, group member selection is key to its success. For example, a group of activists (such as the National Organization for Women) needs members with the technical skills of recruiting new volunteers and seeking and obtaining funding. Members also need the relational skills of motivating members to continue to work on behalf of the organization and the ability to create a supportive environment for members. The challenge is to find the appropriate balance between the two sets of skills. The balance will vary depending on the type of group and/or its activities and goals.

A group deliberately formed for a short period of intense work on a complex project may prefer members with a balance favoring technical skills over relational skills. For example, the technical skills of a team of doctors, nurses, and medical technicians delivering sextuplets are more important to the success of the group's task than team members' interpersonal relations. The team works together for a very short time and then disbands. Roles and responsibilities within the team are highly defined, which helps the team work effectively in the absence of well-developed personal relationships.

In contrast, a team that expects to stay together for a long period may initially favor a balance toward personal and relational skills. This is because, over time, group members can help one another increase their technical proficiency if the relationships among group members are well developed. Let's say that a project team with members representing different operations of a food manufacturer is assigned to develop prototypes for new market initiatives. With representatives from manufacturing, marketing, quality control, and food sourcing, the new product development team has 6 months to develop at least four products for consumer testing. If members possess the ability to work well with one another, they can also rely on one another to help fill in the technical expertise they may lack as individuals.

For instance, Jerry, the representative from manufacturing, knows very little about marketing. Initially, he relies heavily on Shanita's marketing expertise. Jerry asks Shanita lots of questions, requests marketing reports to read, and talks with her over lunch about marketing initiatives that have worked for other products. As the team works on product development, Jerry learns enough about marketing from Shanita to give informed opinions and ask appropriate questions. This

process is enhanced because Jerry finds it easy to approach Shanita, and Shanita appreciates Jerry's willingness to learn about marketing.

Most spontaneously formed groups favor relational over task skills. Because group membership is based primarily on individuals' personal attraction to one another, relational skills are more important. If group members cannot get along and form a cohesive group, attraction will decrease, and members will leave the group voluntarily. This does not mean that task skills are not important—merely that relational skills are more primary.

For example, Rea's golf foursome started over lunch when the four women discovered their common hesitance to take golf lessons. The decision first to take lessons together and then to practice together one day a week was a natural outgrowth of the women liking one another; forming the group was not based on anyone's technical skill in golf. As the group completes its lessons and starts to play on the golf course, members become confident enough to give one another friendly advice about selecting clubs, teeing up, and reading greens. However, if one member consistently gives poor advice or advice that detracts from another's ability to achieve par, this member's technical skill or motivation will come into question and may even disturb the relational balance of the group.

Evaluating Group Member Fit

Regardless of how or why individuals form a group, the fit among group members is important. Each group determines what constitutes fit. A group of friends may decide their fit by assessing the extent to which they enjoy the same types of activities. It is unlikely that a group will remain friends if one member always wants to go to the movies, another prefers to visit historical sites, another likes to party on the town all night, and another enjoys playing bridge. A group of friends can also determine fit by assessing the extent to which members are comfortable with how often they call one another on the phone or visit one another. Many family groups use this aspect of fit in determining which members of the extended family are inside or outside the family group. A task group may determine its fit by how well group members' knowledge and expertise mesh with task requirements. A business group that needs someone knowledgeable in profit and loss statements has not achieved its fit, regardless of how well group members work together, if not one among them has this specific knowledge.

Synergy

One way to evaluate the fit of members relative to the task and relational dimensions of the group is to assess the synergy the group produces. **Synergy** exists when the performance of a group goes beyond the capabilities of individual group members (Schweiger & Sandberg, 1989). When synergy occurs, individual group members feed off one another's energy and interest. How does synergy occur? Plainly, effective and appropriate communication among group members promotes positive

synergy (Salazar, 1995). In essence, group members can accomplish a great deal because their communication about the task does not threaten their relationships. Thus, reciprocally, strong relationships among group members allow the group to work effectively on the task.

You are probably familiar with synergy but know it by another name—team spirit or teamwork. Whatever you call it, you probably are aware of the effects of synergy. For example, suppose marketing employees in an organization are charged with the responsibility of recruiting new business. Individually, each makes cold calls and follows up on leads on potential clients. As individuals, they are fairly effective, gaining at least ten new customers each week. But when the marketing employees start to work interdependently as a team, they increase their goal to fifteen new customers a week. To meet this goal, they exchange information and expertise with one another. Thus, if Melody experiences problems with a potential customer, she has Juan and Dave join her on a conference call to be more persuasive and contribute their specialized knowledge. The marketing team meets regularly before work, before lunch, and in the middle of the afternoon to see where they are in terms of meeting their goal, to pass on information, and to encourage one another. And after a few weeks, they increase their goal to twenty new customers—something that would not have been possible without the synergistic effects of working together as a team. Clearly, the marketing employees could have worked individually and maintained their performance of ten new customers a week. But their willingness to communicate as a group integrated their efforts, which allowed them to capitalize on one another's strengths and create group synergy.

Group Efficacy

Issues related to such things as task and relational dimensions and group member fit affect how well the group believes it can perform. **Group efficacy** is the collective belief among group members that the group can be effective. In other words, group efficacy is a group's collective sense about its capabilities. Group efficacy can only develop if members' goals are in alignment. Thus efficacy is created through interaction.

If efficacy is high, group members will believe that they can coordinate their skills to perform well. As you might suspect, when efficacy is high, group members are more motivated to work to accomplish the group task. Moreover, groups with high efficacy develop strong expectations for their continued success. As a result, these groups have higher goal aspirations because members believe that the group can perform. This belief, in turn, actually strengthens its ability to perform, which leads to group performance that is self-fueling (Hackman, 1990). Unfortunately, groups can also develop poor performance spirals. The extent to which a group develops positive or negative group efficacy depends in part on the support it receives from its environment.

However a group or team comes together, members' initial interactions have an enduring effect on the group (Hackman, 1990). Thus it is essential that a group get off to a good start. If the initial meetings are productive, the group will establish

EVALUATING GROUP SUCCESS

Measuring Your Group's Efficacy

After you have selected group members, or have been assigned to a group, for this course, use the following response scale to answer each of the following items.

1 = to no extent 3 = to a limited extent 5 = to some extent
7 = to a considerable extent 10 = to a great extent

1. My group has confidence in itself.	1	3	5	7	10
2. My group believes that it can become unusually good at producing high-quality work.	1	3	5	7	10
3. My group expects to be known as a high-performing team.	1	3	5	7	10
4. My group believes that it can solve any problem it encounters.	1	3	5	7	10
5. My group believes that it can be very productive.	1	3	5	7	10
6. My group can get a lot done when it works hard.	1	3	5	7	10
7. No task is too tough for my group.	1	3	5	7	10
8. My group expects to have a lot of influence around here.	1	3	5	7	10

Total your score: _____.

Now compare your score to other group members' scores. If your group or some group members score low on several items, use these items as a discussion guide to develop ideas for increasing your group's efficacy.

Source: Adapted from Gibson, Randel, and Earley (2000).

a solid base on which to draw if it has a crisis. But if the initial meetings are unproductive, group members may not be able to draw on the resources of the group to survive a crisis later on. Thus a group must establish its structure and develop an identity by acknowledging an interdependent goal. And to be successful, the group needs an adequate number of members who satisfy the group's task and relational needs. Try "Measuring Your Group's Efficacy" to rate yourself on this dimension.

Summary

Group communication is something that is both familiar to you and a bit confusing. You have always belonged to groups, so you have already developed attitudes and habits associated with working in groups. Although you may have lumped all of your group experiences together, each group is a unique experience. One group is never exactly like another. Because you cannot avoid groups, this book is designed to help you "read" your groups and teams. By analyzing group activities, engaging in reflection after group interaction, and assessing the environment in which groups operate, you will gain a better understanding of group interaction and optimize your group skills.

A group is defined as three or more individuals who identify themselves as a group and who can identify the activity of the group. Five characteristics define groups: group size, interdependence of members, group identity, group goal, and group structure. Using these defining characteristics as avenues of analysis can help us understand the uniqueness of each group and the complexity of group interaction.

Because groups are complex, our model of communication focuses on the fluidity of the roles of sender and receiver. Because group members can be both sender and receiver simultaneously, monitoring group interaction and selecting appropriate and effective interaction strategies can be difficult. If we emphasize the role of feedback, however, we can help groups become more effective because feedback increases the opportunity for shared meaning to develop among group members.

All groups possess two dimensions: task and relationship. Although many of our groups are established to make decisions or solve problems, we should not forget the importance of groups in providing emotional or social support, in managing conflicts, and in socializing or entertaining. Although all groups represent both of these dimensions to some extent, groups must balance these dimensions to support group members' primary task, goal, or activity.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. Think of a group to which you belonged in the past. Analyze it according to the five characteristics for defining groups.
2. Reflect on one of your childhood groups. Compare that experience with one of your adult group experiences. What has changed? What is similar? What do you believe accounts for the differences and similarities?
3. Think of some past classroom group projects. What characteristics made them interesting? What characteristics made them unbearable?
4. When groups are large, some members may think that their individual contributions won't be noticed and, as a result, decrease their level of activity in the group. When circumstances dictate that a group have many members, what strategies can group members use to control this type of social loafing?
5. Thinking back on the different groups in which you have been a member, develop two lists—one for groups you consider successful and another for groups you consider unsuccessful. Review the items on each list, and identify the three most important elements that contributed to group success or that kept the group from being successful. How many of these elements were under your control as an individual group member? For which elements did you need to depend on other group members?
6. Review the table of contents for this book. Thinking about your current level of group skills, develop three lists: (a) group skills and knowledge that you have now, (b) group skills and knowledge that you'd like to learn, and (c) group skills and knowledge that you've mastered and could share with others.