2 *Communicating Within Groups*

Group Skills Preview

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

- *Use verbal symbols to clearly express yourself about group tasks*
- *Use nonverbal symbols to build positive group relationships*
- *Explain how verbal and nonverbal symbols work together to form a complete message system*
- *Use different speaking strategies to adapt to group members with different listening styles*

Many disciplines study group process (for example, anthropology, counseling, management, psychology, and sociology), but communication researchers and consultants have a unique perspective on groups. Group process relies on interaction—both the verbal and nonverbal communication among members of the group. In some contexts, communication may also include written and electronic channels (such as with brainstorming or computer technology). Most researchers believe that communication is the medium through which individuals form a group, because communication creates and sustains interdependency among group members. Groups cease to exist when interdependency and group identity are threatened by a lack of communication.

The study of groups originated in the field of social psychology, so many of the early studies examined individual behavior in groups. Later, social psychologists focused on the entirety of the group process, but they examined the perceptions of group members rather than group members' communication behavior. Researchers in counseling and management also study groups, but they are restricted in the types and contexts of groups they study. Anthropologists study groups in relation to their role in society or their impact on culture. Thus viewing group interaction from a communication perspective is a distinct and unique approach.

Communication scholars interested in groups traditionally have focused on task groups or decision-making groups, but any type of group can be studied from the communication perspective. A counseling group that provides support for those grieving the loss of a loved one is quite different from a committee planning a golf tournament as a community fundraiser. Some groups focus on relationships; others focus on tasks. But for each group to exist, communication must occur. What results from or is achieved in a group is a function of what is communicated
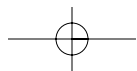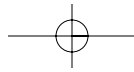
(or not communicated) in that particular group environment and situation. Thus communication is central to what it means to be a member of a group.

Verbal Communication

Words are the lifeblood of group interaction. Even when we communicate non-verbally, we translate those behaviors into words (thoughts, impressions) as we construct meaning for the behaviors. Verbal communication, or what we say, can hold a group together or drive a wedge among members, hindering the accom-plishment of goals. Because the definitions of words can be found in dictionaries, many people falsely believe that words have common, specific meanings for every-one. However, because words are abstract and can act as symbols for different referents, meanings are not centrally located within words themselves. Rather, meaning is derived by the communicators (both sender and receiver) based on the communication context, previous experiences with the words, previous expe-riences with the other person, and even previous experiences with the task. Mean-ing is perceptually based and so is not predictable. For example, think of the word *group.* Before you encountered this book, you likely had a different definition of group than the one presented here. Check out "Interdependence and Group Identity" to see how words can affect a group.

Words and Meanings

Because verbal communication relies on language and because you have more re-ceivers (and more potential errors) in group settings, you must choose your words carefully to communicate clearly. To be effective communicators, you should choose words that are specific and **concrete** in meaning rather than abstract. **Ab-stract** words paint broad generalizations whereas concrete words help the sender


PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Interdependence and Group Identity

Identify a recent group activity with some friends. Recall a statement by one member that had impact on the group (for example, "You know, we should do this again; I had fun" or "This is the last time I bail you guys out"). How did the statement affect the interdependence of group members? Was interdependence highlighted, or did the statement strain the interdependence among members? Did the comment strengthen members' willing-ness to identify with the group, or did the comment cause members to wish they were not part of the group?
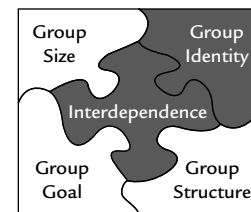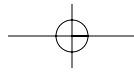
and receiver agree upon what was said. For example, in a group setting, "be on time" may mean that members will come when they think the meeting starts and might even encourage someone who is habitually late to arrive well after the perceived starting time of other group members. In contrast, "the meeting starts at 2 P.M." is more precise and will generate questions about the starting time if group members have different ideas about when the meeting starts.

Moreover, some words used in groups will not appear in any dictionary. Words or phrases can be specific and unique to the group because the group develops meaning for its own use. For example, "the report" to one specific group might mean no less than a twenty-page detailed recommendation with an executive summary for Mr. Santoro on his desk by 8 A.M. Monday. Group members will come to use the shorthand "the report" to refer to this detail. Unless all group members mutually understand these details, the verbal message about "the report" is meaningless. See "What Did You Say?" for tips on how to avoid clichés and other abstractions.

Patterns of Language

We can also consider verbal communication in terms of patterns that exist within the group. Verbal messages can direct ("Let's have a moment of silence, please"), structure ("Harriet, you give your report first, then Rashad will talk about the budget"), or dominate ("Shut up!") the communication system within the group. As these messages accomplish these functions, they create positive or negative relationships among group members.

Naturally, the patterns of verbal messages that emerge and the relationships that follow differ among various types of groups (Ellis, 1979). For example, decision-making groups can develop messages that indicate symmetry, or equality, among members. When group members perceive themselves as equal to other group members, the discussion is more likely to reflect a spirit of inquiry and participation. But decision-making groups can also experience competitive messages as members compete for leadership and other group management roles. And

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⚬ SKILL BUILDER

What Did You Say?

In your next group meeting, challenge yourself to use more concrete than abstract words or clichés. Each time you use an abstract word or phrase, immediately provide a more detailed description or explanation. For example, instead of simply saying, "Sounds good," add "I agree with the plan you proposed" immediately after. Practice this skill in at least three meetings. Eventually, you will begin to automatically edit your verbal messages before you talk.
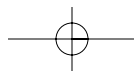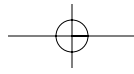
members of support groups send different types of verbal messages. In this context, messages are almost exclusively symmetrical, providing a foundation for members to share their feelings.

To illustrate, examine the following two conversations:

Golf Fundraising Committee

TYLER: Okay, let's get rolling.

NAOMI: I'd like to hear about what corporate sponsors we've got lined up.

TYLER: I think it would move us along quicker to see which golf courses are willing to donate green fees.

NAOMI: But I have to leave the meeting early, and I want to let everyone know about the sponsors.

Grief Support Group

DEBBIE: It's been a really hard week. I'm glad you're all here tonight.

KARL: Me, too. At least here, I can let all of the emotion just be, without having to explain myself.
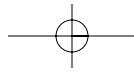
AVERI: Do you want to begin, Debbie?

Notice how the communication functions differently in these two conversations. In the first, communication directs and structures the activities of the group as Tyler and Naomi compete with each other about what should be first on the agenda. If this pattern of competitive messages continues, their relationship in the group will likely suffer. Certainly, their messages to each other will have to demonstrate more equality if they are to communicate effectively. In the second conversation, communication is less directive and more focused on building relationships. No one member is trying to dominate the group or its activity. Averi's comment to Debbie suggests structure for the group, but the request has a completely different tone than Naomi's.

The Impact of Verbal Activity

Some group members talk more; some talk less. However, because it is difficult to hear more than one person talking at a time, it is important to note the person who does the most talking in a group. Differing amounts of **vocal activity,** or the amount of time a member talks in a group, can create different perceptions of group members (Daly, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1977). In general, group members are perceived as being credible—competent, sociable, and composed—as they increase their level of vocal activity. However, if a group member talks too much or consumes all of the talking time in a group, perceptions of credibility decline.

Likewise, a group member who contributes regularly to the group's interaction will be seen as a positive influence on the group. But if the group member
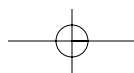
consumes too much talking time, that influence turns from positive to negative. Apparently, then, participating in group interaction will increase positive perceptions about you as a group member. However, if you talk too much and don't give other group members an opportunity to participate, those positive perceptions can deteriorate.

Vocal activity in a group is also noticed when there is silence—when no group member is talking. In a conversation between two people, we expect one person to talk until finished, and then the other person takes over. In a group, things are a bit more complicated. Often, there is no obvious way to decide who has the next talking turn. When silence occurs, two members may compete to talk next. This is not to say that the competition to talk is negative—members may be enthusiastic about joining the conversation.

### *Improving Verbal Communication Skills*

Given the symbolic nature of communication and the number of interaction partners in groups, miscommunication can occur easily. Several techniques can help you be sensitive to misunderstandings that result from the verbal messages you send. For example, before an important meeting, make a list of the terminology that is used in your group, and develop detailed descriptions and explanations of each term. Doing this before you use the terms in the group can help you sharpen your verbal messages.
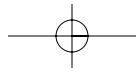
Because some group members may hesitate to ask questions or to seek clarification, be sure to watch for nonverbal messages that indicate group members' need for further information. A member who has a puzzled look or who leans in as if to hear better likely did not receive your verbal message clearly. But also be sensitive to more subtle cues. A group member who is afraid to confront you directly might use the verbal strategy of changing the subject. Or group members might simply avert their gaze and act as if they are bored. Monitoring others' verbal and nonverbal messages can help you identify those instances in which your messages are not clear.

Another way to improve your verbal communication skills is to carefully consider the words you choose to communicate with. Avoid words that will evoke strong emotions from other group members or that have negative connotations. For instance, labeling people as a "flunky," "radical," or "do-gooder" can cause other group members to stop listening. Even said in a joking manner, words with strong emotional content distract from your verbal messages.

Linking your verbal messages to others' comments is another way to improve your verbal skills in a group. Linking shows that you are listening and are contributing to the group. Comments like "Another way of planning for the project is to . . ." and "I agree that students' evaluations of professors are important, but I wonder what professors think of them" indicate that you are focused on the group's task.

Finally, monitor how much you're talking in the group. Is your vocal activity equal to the quality of your contribution? Are you talking simply to hear yourself talk? Are you repeating the same message over and over? Your verbal messages
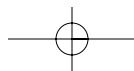
will be better received by other group members if what you're saying is effectively presented and important to the group. Now consider the opposite scenario—you're hardly talking in the group. Your participation is minimal, and when you do speak, it's only to say "yes" and "okay." If this verbal pattern describes you, you need to enhance your group participation by elaborating on your comments. If you have trouble being assertive in a group, write some notes for yourself before the meeting. These can help you feel more confident and participate more.
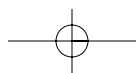
Nonverbal Communication

Group conversations are a mixture of sound and silence. In some groups, members use their speaking turns to deliver monologues. In other groups, members exhibit more complex patterns by interrupting one another, and several group members may even speak at once. Because a group conversation can contain both silence and multiple verbal channels, meaning is also derived from how words are said or how behaviors are used to replace or substitute for verbal messages. This is known as **nonverbal communication.** Nonverbal communication occurs in many forms: through the tone and sound of your voice, your facial expressions and other body gestures, and your use of space, touch, time, and objects. Even when you are not talking in a group, you are communicating nonverbally. Sometimes you do so purposely—for example, looking at your watch and tapping at it to draw attention to the few minutes the group has left. Other times you are unaware of the nonverbal signals you are sending—for example, continuously lacing and unlacing your fingers or closing your eyes when your least favorite person is mentioned. Even when you do not mean to, you are sending powerful signals that others will interpret. Nonverbal communication can be described in terms of both its type and its functions in group interaction (Ketrow, 1999).

Types of Nonverbal Communication

One type of nonverbal communication, **vocalics,** or vocal characteristics, accompanies everything we say. Meaning can be derived from how we use our voices while we talk. Vocalics include inflection (upward as in asking a question, downward as in making a statement), tone (monotone, excited), accent (southern, eastern seaboard), rate (fast, slow), pitch (deep, nasal), volume (fast, slow), number of vocal interrupters ("aaaahhh," "well," "uh"), and quality of voice indicators (clear, scared).

Subtle (and not so subtle) cues—like irony and sarcasm—about intensity and emotion are given through vocalics. Dominant and high-status group members speak rapidly and use a loud and sure tone of voice whereas more submissive members use a passive tone and a slow rate of speech. Friendliness toward other group members can be demonstrated by warm voice qualities whereas unfriendliness comes through in irritable and sarcastic tones.

Facial expressions and other body movements such as gestures, posture, and eye behavior are referred to as **kinesics.** Gestures and body movements are often

Even though you may be unaware of your own nonverbal communication in a group, you are interpreting other members' nonverbal behaviors.

associated with leadership displays in groups. Eye contact is particularly important in group settings because it regulates who will talk next. When group members are willing to talk, they are more likely to look at the current speaker or at the leader/facilitator, signaling their intention to communicate. In contrast, members who want to avoid speaking might look away or down at their laps. Group members often use facial expressions to demonstrate their approval or disapproval of the topic being discussed or the person making the presentation.

Proxemics, or the use of space, is particularly important in group interactions because where group members sit relative to one another affects the flow of the conversation. Generally, group members who are dominant tend to position themselves more centrally in the group's space. This is why group leaders often sit at the end of a conference table. Similarly, group members may choose sitting positions based on their perceived level of status or their desired level of privacy. Members who want to participate more position themselves where they are visible to more group members and more likely to be included in the flow of the conversation. Members who want to participate less are more likely to find a seating position that removes them from the flow of the conversation or from direct eye contact with other group members.

Haptics, or touch, is the nonverbal cues people use to demonstrate perceptions of warmth and liking. Group members can touch one another on the hands, shoulders, and arms to demonstrate their affiliation with one another. Handshakes are a common nonverbal cue used at the beginning and end of meetings.

The use of time, or **chronemics,** is also important in group interaction. How much members talk, or how much time they let elapse before responding to other group members contributes to perceptions of leadership and influence. Likewise, showing up at a meeting on time or being habitually late nonverbally communicates information to other group members.

Group membership and identity is often expressed through **artifacts,** or the use of clothing, jewelry, and other accessories. For instance, a group member who wants to demonstrate her affiliation with a sorority might wear a sweatshirt
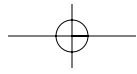
monogrammed with the sorority's insignia. Artifacts can also provide cues for group members about appropriate ways to start conversations, especially when group members are unfamiliar with one another.
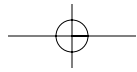
Of course, nonverbal communication does not occur as a single cue. Rather, multiple nonverbal communication cues occur simultaneously, from all group members. Thus group members must learn to decode multiple nonverbal cues that can serve many different functions.

Multiple Meanings of Nonverbal Communication

Like verbal communication, nonverbal communication is highly symbolic, so precise meanings are sometimes difficult to determine. For example, you may like wearing black because it's your favorite color, but another group member may think you are sad. Similarly, if you always have a smile on your face, others may perceive you as happy-go-lucky. But you may simply have been taught as a child to be pleasant to everyone, to smile and nod your head while listening to others. In such cases, these behaviors are automatic and are performed unconsciously. However, others in the group may attribute a specific meaning to such nonverbal actions.

Reading nonverbal cues from others is both a conscious and an unconscious activity. It is conscious when we are looking to attribute meaning to words and then develop attitudes toward others based upon those meanings. But many other attributions are made unconsciously. Our perceptual abilities to select and pick up nonverbal cues affect what we hear and how we perceive others. Alternately, we are often unaware of the nonverbal cues that we display. Because many nonverbal cues are physiologically based (for example, your face reddens when you are nervous, or you shuffle your feet while sitting because your knee hurts), many receivers believe that nonverbal messages are more credible or believable than verbal messages. Thus knowing what nonverbal cues you display and how others read them is important to your success as a group member.

To a large extent, our use of nonverbal communication and our interpretations of others' nonverbal behavior is culture-bound. As children, we learn many nonverbal practices by watching others and gauging how they respond to our own nonverbal messages. As you take this class, you already have participated in hundreds of groups, and these culturally bound experiences have formed your expectations for the use of nonverbal behavior. You have learned how to use nonverbal communication to indicate your willingness to join groups and talk with others, to leave groups or avoid interaction with others, and to protect your individuality in groups (Cathcart & Cathcart, 1996). Thus groups with culturally diverse members may have some difficulty making sense of nonverbal communication. If someone says something you do not understand, you are likely to ask for clarification. But if someone gestures or makes a facial expression you do not understand, you are more likely to develop an interpretation without checking with the other person. See "Cracking the Nonverbal Code" for some practice in recognizing nonverbal communication.

MASTERING GROUP SKILLS

Cracking the Nonverbal Code

In one of your next group experiences, plan to do the following: During the interaction, concentrate on the nonverbal messages that other group members use or display. Afterward, identify and describe those nonverbal messages that drew your attention to other group members. Ask yourself these questions: Did any of the nonverbal messages displayed cause you to evaluate group members positively or negatively? If so, how did the nonverbal messages in those two categories differ? What attributions did you make about the people displaying these nonverbal messages? Finally, how did you respond to their nonverbal messages—positively, negatively, or neutrally?

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can help group members structure and manage their interaction, manage their identities with the group, and convey relationship information including messages expressing dominance, power, and leadership, and warmth, liking, and affection. Thus nonverbal cues provide key information about the relational interests of group members.

Even when they are not aware of it, group members use nonverbal messages for some communication functions that are important in group settings. Nonverbal communication indicates intensity and emotion, regulates who will talk (turn taking, initiation and termination of conversations), reveals comfort levels, symbolizes community, helps to develop or clarify relationships (dominance, power, intimacy), and influences others. Nonverbal communication can also provide cues about other group members' culture, race, gender, and personality. In short, nonverbal communication is the primary means by which we develop and manage impressions.

In group settings, some nonverbal behaviors, such as physical distance, posture, and touch, change relatively little once the group has settled into its interaction setting and created norms for the use of such behavior. Other nonverbal behaviors, however, such as facial expressions, body movements, and the use of silence, are powerful indicators about the dynamic process occurring within the group (Argyle & Kendon, 1967). Nonverbal cues are particularly good at revealing deception, especially when there are mixed messages. What you say is controllable; the nonverbal cues you provide are often more spontaneous. When these two channels of communication do not match or reinforce each other, group members will suspect that you are attempting to deceive them (Burgoon, 1980, 1985).

Nonverbal cues are also powerful indicators about the quality of a group's interaction and the status of group members. For instance, once a week, Gloria, Marcia, Linda, and Anika meet over breakfast to discuss common issues they face as nontraditional students returning to undergraduate life. Although their conversations generally focus on school topics, the primary purpose of these get-togethers is the mutual support group members provide. It is easy to tell when it has been a bad week for one of the women. The conversation starts slowly but then builds to such an intensity level that others in the restaurant turn to look at
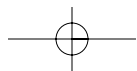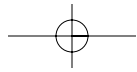
what is going on. The women's voices get louder, and the pace of the conversation quickens—emphasizing their interest in the topic of conversation—as they all complain about Wednesday's midterm. Those who overhear and witness their conversation can tell that, even with all of the complaining, these women are best friends: Hugs are routinely given, bodies are hunched over the table toward one another, one woman leans across the table to playfully poke at another. Even if you could not hear exactly what the women were saying, you could make interpretations about their conversation based on the displayed nonverbal dynamics. Thus their nonverbal communication serves specific functions within their group even as it provides information to outside observers.

Nonverbal messages can be used to signal that you are uncomfortable. Perhaps the group is talking about an issue that you find too personal, but you are not willing to state your objection overtly. To communicate your level of comfort, you could withdraw from the group and fall silent. You could also decrease eye contact with other group members and physically draw your body inward. If the topic is making your very uncomfortable, your face may even redden. These nonverbal messages let other group members know that you uncomfortable in the group.
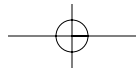
Nonverbal messages can also be used to establish or clarify relationships between group members. For example, suppose Hillary shifts her eyes from the speaker to Sam. As she does this, she widens her eyes, arches her eyebrows, and smiles slightly. This seemingly innocuous behavior may be the first signal that a coalition is forming between Hillary and Sam. If Sam returns her glance with a smile or a wink, these nonverbal signals indicate a shift in their relationship from merely colleagues in a group to something more significant.

When group members use more direct eye contact and more face-to-face body orientation, it indicates that greater intimacy is developing within the group. These nonverbal behaviors suggest two things: (1) that members are developing greater positive regard for one another and (2) that they have a greater desire to affiliate with one another (Mabry, 1989a). Generally, as group members interact over time and in multiple sessions, their nonverbal behaviors give cues to the relationships that are developing among group members.

Physical appearance, vocalics, and the use of time are especially important in influencing others in groups. The image you present of yourself often influences how others receive what you say. For instance, if you come to group meetings dressed comfortably but neatly and speak confidently, group members will likely pay attention and remember what you say. They will see you as a credible source of information. But if you disregard standards of dress or cleanliness, you may unknowingly create an impression that what you say cannot be taken seriously. Finally, group members often pay specific attention to how other group members use time. Group members who habitually arrive late may create the impression that they cannot be trusted with important group business or activities, or that the group, its members, or its activity are unimportant to them.

Proxemics, or group members' uses of space, also serve important functions in group settings. How group members are seated affects the flow of interaction within the group. Members who are most centrally located and/or who have visual access
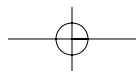
to others are likely to participate more in the group's interaction. Frequently in decision-making meetings, members sit around a rectangular table. If someone takes the end chair, members typically look to that person to initiate the discussion and to identify who talks next. Because it is difficult to see others on the same side of the table, members are more likely to talk to those sitting across from them or to those sitting next to them. Generally, it is better to hold meetings at a round table so all members can see one another and communicate directly.

If given a choice about where to sit, group members who have developed relationships outside the group structure will usually sit next to one another. When this happens, detrimental side conversations are more likely to occur. If group members do not know one another, they are more likely to first develop a relationship with the person sitting next to them.

### *Verbal and Nonverbal Communication as a System*

Obviously, you cannot communicate only verbally, without some nonverbal elements. Other members will interpret your verbal messages as they develop meaning for your actions. Simply, verbal and nonverbal are intertwined. However, the two message systems are not always in agreement. You can probably recall when someone said something to you but you responded more to how the person stated the message (nonverbal communication) than to what the person said (verbal communication).
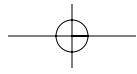
Research has demonstrated that when receiving inconsistent messages—messages in which the verbal and nonverbal components do not agree—receivers are more likely to believe the nonverbal message. When inconsistent messages are sent, receivers respond in one of three ways (Leathers, 1979). They acknowledge to you that they cannot determine the meaning of the inconsistent message, giving you a second chance to get your message across. Or they become more diligent and pay more attention to you, thinking that they must have missed something. Or they withdraw from the interaction when they cannot clarify the inconsistency.

You probably do not want to send messages in which the verbal and nonverbal components do not match. However, this happens frequently in groups. For example, at times group members may feel pressured to commit verbally to something they know they cannot deliver. Although their verbal message indicates agreement, their tones of voice reveal that they are unsure about their commitment. Inconsistent messages also occur when group members do not think they can provide honest criticism or feedback to other group members. To the extent that you can deliver clear verbal and nonverbal messages in your group's interaction, your participation in the group will be more favorably received.

Improving Nonverbal Communication Skills

Improving nonverbal communication skills is more difficult than improving verbal communication skills because we're less conscious of the nonverbal messages we send. Thus the first step is to identify what nonverbal messages you send and
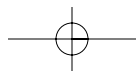
how they influence the group's interaction. One way to do this is to ask a group member you trust to observe you during a group meeting. This person can help you identify those nonverbal messages that contribute to the group and those that detract from it.

Another way to learn more about how your nonverbal messages influence the group is to watch how others respond to you. Suppose you want to ask a question and look toward the group member speaking to get his attention, but he ignores you. What other nonverbal message could you use to establish your talking turn? It's easy to assume that the other group member is being rude or impolite, but maybe your nonverbal cue wasn't strong enough to signal that you wanted to talk. Perhaps you need to make your nonverbal message more direct and forceful. You could lean forward in your chair and open your mouth in preparation to speak while directing your gaze at the speaker. Or you could add a short verbal message, such as "Tom?" to your lean and gaze.
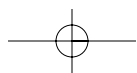
You can also improve your nonverbal communication skills by observing and analyzing the effectiveness of other group members. Select a group member whom you admire, and pay careful attention to the type of nonverbal cues he or she uses during the meeting. Try to identify how those cues functioned during the meeting. You are likely to identify a skill that you can incorporate into your communication repertoire.
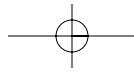
The Listening Process

When we think about how we communicate in groups, we often forget that, in addition to verbal and nonverbal messages, listening is a major part of the communication process. Because we focus so much energy on what we say and how we say it, we often overlook our listening skills. In the group context, listening is important because we spend far more time listening than talking. In fact, personnel managers asked to rate group communication skills identified listening effectively as most important (Hawkins & Fillion, 1999).

Unfortunately, most listening research focuses on listening to one other person in instructional, public, or relational (dyadic) contexts. Although these findings certainly can tell us something about listening, they do not address the complexities the group context imposes on the listening process. Group interactions are more complex than dyadic interactions because group conversations frequently include competing side conversations or multiple speakers striving to gain other group members' attention. But the basic principles of listening identified from these other contexts can help you become a better listener in groups.

Why is listening so important in groups? There are several reasons. First, speakers don't often realize that other group members are not listening and so continue to talk, assuming that they are listening. As a result, listening errors go undetected. This is particularly problematic because there are multiple group members in the listening role. Some members may even fake listening, believing that the presence of other group members will cover for their lack of attention. In comparison to dyadic interaction, there is less social pressure to listen in groups,
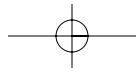
Contrary to what most people believe, you spend much more time listening than talking in groups.

and as a result, ineffective listening goes unnoticed (Watson, 1996). Second, group settings can lend themselves to extraneous interaction, which gives some group members the license to take a break from listening. Some group members might even try to work on other activities when they should be listening. Third, listening errors can occur when listeners interpret the message differently from the sender of the message. The problem is compounded in groups—three listeners can mean that three different interpretations exist, four listeners can result in four different interpretations, and so on. Fourth, listeners have a more difficult job in group interactions because it is difficult to attend to the many points of view being presented. It is easier to concentrate on one person speaking or on one idea at a time.

Remember that listeners, not speakers, control whether they will listen. And in group situations, you'll have more choices as a listener than as a speaker. What can you do to increase your listening effectiveness in groups? First, try to consciously focus on listening. Second, recognize that listening is a multistep process. Too frequently, listening is associated with hearing, yet excellent hearing does not ensure good listening. Listening is both a physical and a perceptual process. After you actually hear the sound of others talking (the physical process), you must make sense of it (the perceptual process). What was said? What does it mean to you? How will you reply? These stages occur rapidly, making it difficult to distinguish one stage from another, and listening errors can occur in any of these stages. You can improve your listening by paying attention to the process and making a conscious attempt to practice effective listening.
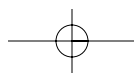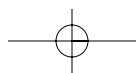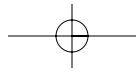
Listening Styles

In your role as a message sender, you must acknowledge differences in listening styles, as listening styles can influence receivers' interpretations of your verbal messages. Effective presenters of ideas know that other group members have different listening styles, and they accommodate those differences in their organization and presentation of ideas and opinions. There are four distinct listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented (Watson, 1996). Because listening styles develop over a lifetime, individuals bring predisposed listening profiles to group settings. Each listening style has its own advantages and disadvantages. Although there is no single best listening style, more people prefer people- and action-oriented styles to content- and time-oriented ones. In the descriptions that follow, which style seems to best describe you?

People-Oriented Group members with a **people-oriented listening style** are attuned to the emotional aspects of conversations and to relationships with other group members. A people-oriented listener is the person you would likely seek out in a group when things are not going your way. An individual with this listening style demonstrates concern for others, remains nonjudgmental, and provides clear verbal and nonverbal feedback. The people-oriented listener has the ability to quickly identify emotional states and is interested in building relationships. However, these listeners can become overly involved in the feelings of others or can be blind to others' faults. They also may internalize the emotional states of others and even be seen as intrusive. In addition, they tend to be overly expressive in giving feedback. In a group of close friends, a people-oriented listening style might be preferable. But in a fast-paced work group under pressure to produce something, too many group members with this style might slow the process unnecessarily and introduce emotion when other behaviors might be more effective.

Action-Oriented Those with an **action-oriented listening style** are almost the opposite of people-oriented listeners. Action-oriented listeners concentrate on the task or issue at hand, help others stay on task, and give clear feedback about expectations. This type of listener helps the group by concentrating energy on understanding the task or activity, helping others focus on what is important to the group, and encouraging others to be organized and concise. Given the advantages of this listening style, it might seem that a group would want all its members to be action-oriented. But there are drawbacks to this listening style. These individuals can be impatient with unorganized speakers who ramble, jump ahead, and move quickly to conclusions. In short, their preference for action on the task or activity can foster a defensive or negative climate in the group. In general, groups are more effective when members represent both people-oriented and action-oriented listening styles.

Content-Oriented Individuals with a **content-oriented listening style** take on the role of critical evaluators when they carefully examine everything they hear.

These group members can see all sides of an issue and enjoy the complexity that group discussions offer. Group members demonstrating a content-oriented listening style appreciate technical information, which they test for clarity and understanding. When a group member is presenting an idea, they give encouragement to support others' ideas. Content-oriented listeners welcome complex and challenging information because they have the ability to look at all sides of an issue. However, they can be overly detail-oriented, which may intimidate others. This type of listener may also minimize or overlook the value of nontechnical information or may discount information from unknown sources. Because content-oriented listeners like lots of detail, they can take a long time to make a decision.

Time-Oriented Finally, there is the **time-oriented listening style.** As you might guess, this type of person values time and encourages other group members to do the same. Although it might sound as if having a time-oriented group member will keep the group from wasting time and other resources, with too much of a time orientation, discussions can be arbitrarily cut off before the group has had a chance to examine all potential solutions or to think through the ramifications of its decision. Time-oriented listeners can manage and save group time by setting guidelines about time for meetings and conversations, discouraging speakers from wasting time, and giving cues to others when time is being wasted. These are all important functions in a group. Alternately, group members with this listening style can be impatient with those whom they perceive to be time wasters. They may interrupt others in discussions or rush speakers by looking at their watch or the clock. Each behavior limits other members' contributions by heightening time pressures. No doubt we all have been in meetings in which time was wasted, and it may sound as if having a time-oriented listener in the group would be a positive thing. But too much time pressure on a group from internal sources can be disastrous. Most decision-making groups already work under external time constraints, so adding additional time constraints from inside may cause a group to shut down, allowing or forcing the leader to decide without the input of group members.

Adapting Your Listening Style

Each listening style has its own advantages and disadvantages. Although some people are predisposed to a specific listening style, others can move fluidly among the styles. Thus you need to recognize that different group situations require different listening skills. Your primary goal as a listener is to analyze the group situation, decide what is required of you as an individual member, and then develop and apply the most effective listening orientation. It is helpful to analyze the listening style preferences of other group members. Adapting your messages to the listening styles of others increases your chances of getting and holding their attention and having your message heard.

When encountering people-oriented listeners, use "we" instead of "I" statements to emphasize the relationship between you and the listener. Stories can also
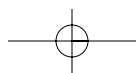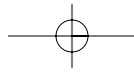
⚉ SKILL BUILDER

Are You Listening?

Before your next group meeting, review the descriptions of the listening styles. As group members talk, identify the listening style that can increase your effectiveness in attending to each speaker. Which listening styles did you need? one or several? Select the style you use least well, and identify two specific things you can do to practice that listening style. For example, if you need to enhance the people-oriented listening style, pay close enough attention to the stories the speaker tells that you can repeat them.

be used to draw the attention of people-oriented listeners. It is not necessary to neglect facts and information; simply embed them within the story. With action-oriented listeners, you should keep your points to three or fewer, numbering them for clarity as you talk. Content-oriented listeners respond best to data and facts. When multiple viewpoints are available, present each side and then give your recommendation. With time-oriented listeners, it is best to assess and acknowledge time limitations up front and then get to the point quickly. See "Are You Listening?" for ways to improve your listening styles.

Listening Pitfalls

Not only are there different listening styles that affect listening effectiveness, but there are pitfalls or barriers to consider. These can occur in any context but may be especially hazardous in group settings because many people have committed their time, energy, and resources to the group. Poor listening can be a major obstacle to group participation (Gastil, 1993). One of the most frequently occurring listening pitfalls involves prejudging the speaker or her or his content. What evidence of prejudging can you find in this example?

> MELISSA: (to Ken) I can't find Ricky. (Ricky comes in late to the meeting.) Ricky, where were you?
>
> RICKY: Just went to do some business for the group.
>
> KEN: Right, Ricky . . . You? Business?
>
> RICKY: You know, I had to cash some checks at the bank.
>
> KEN: Please don't tell me you're in charge of our finances!
>
> MELISSA: I asked Ricky to open an account for us.
>
> KEN: Yeah, what kind of account is that? What are *you* doing with our money?

The more heterogeneous the group, the more likely it is that group members will express a variety of ideas or opinions. Although these differences can benefit

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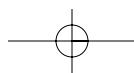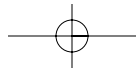
groups, you can only negotiate these differences if you allow yourself to hear what others say. If you prejudge others because their views are different, ignore views that differ from your own, or reinterpret what was said to fit your own ideas, you have generated your own listening barriers. Not only have you failed to hear what was said, but you have arbitrarily created a barrier to establishing positive relationships with those members.

Another listening pitfall involves rehearsing a response. This happens in two ways. First, it occurs when you convince yourself that you know exactly what another group member will say, and so rehearse your response before you get to the group meeting. Thus you are armed with a response to something you have not even heard! The second way this pitfall occurs is when you rehearse a response while another group member is speaking. In doing so, you may miss important aspects of the speaker's comments that come later in his or her speaking turn. This pitfall usually revolves around your overly selective attention to flaws in the argument or to irrelevant factors. That is, you hear something that catches your attention—often because you are looking for something negative—and then focus on creating a response rather than hearing the other group member out.

In groups in which members are brought together because they have specialized knowledge or represent different interests, effective listening becomes even more important. Group members representing different departments, factions, or interests bring with them a unique perspective or frame for listening. Such a frame may make it difficult for them to hear or understand what other group members are trying to say. In other words, they are using **selective listening.**

Let's examine how easily selective listening operates in the following group. Several individuals have been appointed to an advisory group whose goal is to recommend ways to improve a city park and playground facility. The mayor insists that all interested parties be involved. Thus the group is composed of a member of the city's planning department, a member of the city's park commission, three residents from the area of the park site (an elderly resident with no children or grandchildren, and two residents with young children), and a social worker with knowledge about gang violence. Because each individual is a part of this group due to his or her special interest in or knowledge of the group's task, it is going to be difficult for them to avoid selective listening. When selective listening occurs, group members not only do not hear other points of view but also tend to interpret what was said according to their personal expectations:

> PARK COMMISSION REPRESENTATIVE: It looks like we all agree that this park needs to be kept in better physical shape than we have been doing. Now, let's talk about what type of activities we want this park to support.
>
> RESIDENT WITH YOUNG CHILD: I think we should have plenty of playground equipment . . . slides, swings, that kind of thing.
>
> RESIDENT WITH OLDER CHILD: Tim really likes to play softball with his friends, and I like him to be close to home. So I suggest we have a ball diamond.
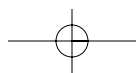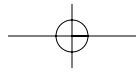
RESIDENT WITH YOUNG CHILD: Okay, but I don't want the bigger kids hitting balls into the area where the smaller kids are playing.

ELDERLY RESIDENT WITH NO GRANDCHILDREN: Parks are for us, too. Just because we're senior citizens you want to leave us out!

PARK COMMISSION REPRESENTATIVE: No one's trying to leave you out—we don't want to leave anyone out. Have you been to Elmway Park? Plenty of senior citizen activities there. If you'd like, I could introduce you to the activities coordinator.

ELDERLY RESIDENT: Thank you, I'd like that.

SOCIAL WORKER: I thought we were discussing park activities.

PARK COMMISSION REPRESENTATIVE: We are; what are your ideas?

SOCIAL WORKER: Well, I'm most concerned about gangs and gang violence. I certainly don't want to see the neighborhoods around the park deteriorate because we create a space for illegal drug activity.

Notice how, when the park commission representative asks about park activities, each member of the advisory board hears something a little different. One resident is concerned that her child have a play area close to home. Another is more concerned about how the activities of different age groups will fit together. The elderly resident becomes defensive, feeling that others on the board are leaving her out. And the social worker certainly lets her bias about preventing gang activity be known. Thus, from the same stimulus question, advisory board members re-create the message to fit their own interests and then respond to further strengthen those positions. Try "How Well Do You Listen?" to see if you can identify the listening styles and listening barriers evident in your groups' interaction.
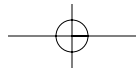

👥 EVALUATING GROUP SUCCESS

How Well Do You Listen?

Organize yourselves into small groups of no more than five members. For this exercise, it is best if you are grouped with people whom you do not know well. The goal of your group's 20- to 30-minute discussion is for members to get to know one another better. Throughout your conversation, try to identify at least five common elements—for example, what your favorite vacation spots are, how you came to select this school, what you expect your salary to be when you finish college, what television shows you watch, how you picked your major, or what you consider to be unique or unusual about yourself.

When you are finished, talk about the listening process that occurred in this discussion. What listening styles were evident? How did group members demonstrate that they were listening? Did anyone make an attempt to respond specifically to another group member's listening style? What made it easier to listen? What made it more difficult? Did any listening pitfalls occur? What could have been done to overcome these pitfalls? Overall, how would you assess your listening effectiveness in this exercise?
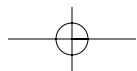
Improving Listening

The consequences of poor listening in groups include poor working relationships, ineffective group outcomes, and time lost to faulty group processes. When a group finds that it is rehashing the same material or that individual tasks are not being carried out according to the group's instructions, faulty listening may be to blame. Replace these ineffective listening habits with **active listening**—paraphrasing what the speaker has said, asking questions to confirm what was said, taking notes, and so on. Listening actively means trying to paraphrase what the previous speaker meant. But don't stop there. Ask for confirmation or correction of what you heard. To illustrate, notice how Matt uses this active listening technique during a meeting with Rea and Clinton:

> REA: If we want to pursue this science and public issue grant, I think we need to find out which problem is more serious.

> CLINTON: Yeah, but isn't it obvious that the ozone problem is worse than the respiratory disease project?

> MATT: Guys, I'm not sure what we're proposing. Clinton, it seems that you favor the ozone project and Rea hasn't made up her mind yet. (This statement clarifies for others what Matt has heard.)

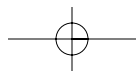> REA: Well, yeah. But the ozone project is okay with me.

> CLINTON: Okay, let's talk about the ozone problem first. See, to me, if there's this huge hole in our atmosphere caused by CFCs in some places and a concentration of ozone in other places, that causes this build-up, or the greenhouse effect. Scientists think that this is what is causing the increase in respiratory disease. So, it seems a moot point to worry about respiratory problems when that issue itself is probably determined by ozone. Right, Rea?
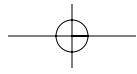
> REA: Well . . .

> MATT: Let me see if I got this right. You believe that environmental issues are connected and that some problems are more primary than others. And, more importantly, you believe that the ozone problem may actually be that primary problem. Is that right? (This response is Matt's paraphrase of what Clinton said.)

> CLINTON: Right. I agree totally. (This statement is Clinton's confirmation that Matt understood him correctly.) But now that I think more about it, I am wondering if an ozone project may be too big of an issue for this group to tackle before the grant due date.

This technique may seem cumbersome in a fast-moving group conversation, but it is well worth it in the long run as the group avoids recurring discussions and miscommunication. You have probably been a member of a group in which each member left the meeting thinking he or she understood the instructions. But when the group reconvened and members compared their results, it became obvious that there were great differences in their understanding of the instructions.

Most group members have to consciously practice the art of active listening. You can improve your own listening by monitoring your use of clichéd responses such as "right," "yeah," and "I know what you mean." Some people are extremely good at using these phrases to indicate that they are listening when, in reality, they are not paying close attention to the content. They simply use these phrases to move the conversation along.

Taking notes is another good way to improve your listening skills. This is not to suggest that you write down everything that is said, never looking up at the group members who are speaking. Rather, you should listen and then jot down a paraphrase of someone's comment. This gives you a good record of the group's interaction, and enables you to reflect on important points and to assess how your opinions and ideas can move the group toward its goal. Another way to increase your listening effectiveness is to ask questions. If you have a question, other group members are likely to have similar ones. If no one asks a question, then the group has skipped an important step in the critical evaluation process, and a poor idea may go unchallenged. You can also increase listening effectiveness by looking at the speaker. If you do not, you will miss nuances and nonverbal cues that get you involved in the conversation. You also sabotage listening effectiveness if you use group time to take notes on another meeting or to plan your next day's schedule.
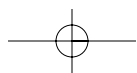
Is it worth your time to develop good listening skills? One study revealed that group members who were rated "most like a leader" were also rated "good listeners" (Bechler & Johnson, 1995). The development of effective listening skills seems to enhance others' perceptions of individuals' leadership ability. Moreover, those group members who were perceived to be poor listeners were more likely to be eliminated from consideration as leader of the group.
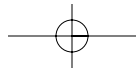
Is there any way to improve the overall listening effectiveness in the group? One option is to secure a meeting space that is quiet—preferably behind closed doors. Groups need to concentrate on the task at hand, and quiet meeting areas help them do that. Another technique for highlighting the importance of listening in group settings is to audiotape a group session. In listening to just a few minutes of interaction, group members often realize that they missed much of what transpired. This simple technique reinforces the need for good listening skills.

Summary

The study of groups spans many disciplines, but the communication discipline has its own unique perspective. Group process relies on verbal and nonverbal interaction; without it, a group ceases to exist. Therefore verbal messages are central to group communication.

To be most effective, group members need to use concrete rather than abstract words and to recognize that definitions are not simply found in dictionaries. Rather, groups are capable of creating unique meanings for words and phrases. Verbal communication also helps structure the group, with feedback creating patterns of symmetrical or competitive messages that contribute to each group's uniqueness. Remember that, although it is important to actively participate in a group, consum-

ing too much of a group's time will adversely affect others' perceptions of you. Likewise, how you communicate is as important as what you communicate.

Nonverbal communication is also important in group settings. Your use of vocalics, kinesics, proxemics, haptics, chronemics, and artifacts creates messages and meanings for other group members. Nonverbal communication fulfills functions within groups that are sometimes difficult to communicate verbally. But interpreting nonverbal messages requires a great deal of skill because multiple meanings abound in these messages.

Remember that verbal and nonverbal communication are intertwined. How you interpret messages from others depends on both the verbal and nonverbal components. But when verbal and nonverbal messages are inconsistent, receivers tend to rely on the nonverbal message.

Listening is another type of critical communication in group settings, because groups always have more receivers or listeners than senders. There are four different listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented. To be an effective group member, you should be knowledgeable about each style and know how to adapt your messages to each. Listening pitfalls are prevalent in groups, and all group members are occasionally guilty of poor listening. You can improve your listening in groups by practicing active listening and by taking notes when others talk.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. Attend a public discussion group. This might be a group on your campus (a student government or student organization meeting) or in your community (an advisory hearing, or a support group). Pay particular attention to the words group members use. How specific and clear are members in describing concepts? How can you tell if group members share meanings for the words that are used? How do members display attentiveness or lack of attentiveness through nonverbal communication? Does any member display particularly annoying nonverbal behavior? How well do other group members listen when someone is speaking? Can you identify any listening pitfalls? Write a short evaluation of your experience. Identify three things you learned from watching this group.

2. In groups, develop a list of arguments that support the statement "Group members need to be good listeners." Rank-order your list of arguments, and provide a rationale for your rankings.

3. How would you explain to someone with no knowledge of communication the importance of communication in group settings?