



IMPROVING COMMUNICATION: WHAT TO SAY

LOOKING AHEAD

After completing this chapter, you will be able to

- Discuss how people verbalize on different levels.
- Name and give examples of the four levels of self-disclosure.
- Recognize appropriateness of and benefits of healthy self-disclosure.
- Give and receive compliments in a positive way.
- Explain perception and use perception checking and dimensions of awareness in order to express thoughts clearly.
- Respond positively to criticism, metamesages, and bothersome language patterns.

Only if we honestly reveal ourselves can we truly know and appreciate each other.

—Sharon Hanna

“Yackity-yack, yackity-yack” is a recurring phrase in a light, popular song of years ago. **Content** consists of the words and sentences uttered during the communication process. “Yackity-yack,” composed of idle comments, makes up the content of many conversations. However, content also includes words that go down in history such as President John F. Kennedy’s famous line, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Examining what you say and finding positive ways of expressing yourself will help you become a better communicator, which leads to positive relationships.

Understanding Content

Think of all the topics of conversation you cover during the day. “What time is it?” “How are you?” “Nice day, isn’t it?” “I got a speeding ticket on the way to work!” “I do not like greasy food.” “I am feeling depressed.” “I think that employees deserve more input into company policy.” These are just a few pieces of possible conversations. Although some comments lack depth and may even be trivial, talking with others is nonetheless important.

Levels of Content

Categorization of content is useful. Five levels identified by Powell (1969) are related to an individual's willingness to share parts of the self. The levels are listed here in order of least revealing to deepest sharing.

Cliché conversation. This is made up of superficial and conventional comments such as "How are you?" and the predictable response of "Fine," "What do you think of the weather today?" "Nice party," and "Have a nice day." Sometimes called cocktail-party talk, such comments are usually safe, with no sharing of self. This type serves its purpose, however, and life would be dreary without it.

Facts about others. Just a step above a cliché is a comment about a neighbor, friend, coworker, or family member. Whether positive or negative, nothing is revealed about the speaker except that she or he can talk about other people. "Our new neighbor works for the school system."

Ideas and judgments. This is riskier because the speaker reveals thoughts and opinions. Fearing rejection, the usual pattern is to say only so much and retreat if any adverse reaction is noted. "I do not think Joe was a good choice for the neighborhood association position."

Feelings (emotions) or "gut level." Because of emotional suppression, this level is difficult for most speakers. Improving verbal expression of emotions is an important life skill.

Peak communication. Openness, honesty, and complete willingness to share occur at this level. For most, this level is achieved only with close friends and loved ones. Sadly, too often what would seem to be a close relationship lacks this level of communication. "Your friendship is important to me."

Excellent communicators use all of the levels in appropriate situations and in reasonable amounts.

Awareness of Content

The words we use reveal a great deal about our attitudes and personalities and directly influence the effect we have on others. Based on the premise that we create and shape our relationships through talk, the book *I Only Say This Because I Love You* (Tannen, 2001) is a useful guide in helping people become more aware of content. A positive communicator wants to avoid potential pitfalls in the communication process. Specific areas of possible difficulty follow.

Semantics. A major common problem is a difference in **semantics**, the meaning of words. A Vietnamese man in a career development class heard the instructor talk about the need to sell oneself in order to get a job. He responded that "Selling myself is bad." Understandably, he had literally interpreted the word "sell." After it was explained to him there was another meaning, he was reassured and said, "Yes, that is good." Even if people share the same native language, misunderstanding can occur. Using clear expressions, stating your own meaning, and then using examples that are concrete or describing behaviors will decrease the opportunities for semantic problems. Feedback by listeners is helpful in this

regard. "If verbal communication is to be reasonably clear, both the sender of a message and the receiver have the responsibility to make it so" (Satir, 1983, p. 88).

Dialect. Related to semantics is **dialect**, a variety of a language that differs from other varieties of the same language, including distinct pronunciations, unique meanings, and different words altogether. Dialect often reflects differences in region and culture. Differences in dialect can be interesting and fun and only disconcerting when some people insist that their way of speaking is the only way.

Bias-free language. Awareness is necessary in order to avoid the use of **biased language**, words and statements that are insensitive and demeaning. Sensitive people do not want to offend, and in the workplace, using biased language will keep you from being hired or could get you fired. Certain examples related to race, religion, gender, disabilities, and ethnic background are obvious. Derogatory labels such as "broad," "retard," "nigger," "honky," "spick," or "fag" and words that historically are demeaning such as "boy," "colored people," "little woman," "deaf and dumb," "poor white trash," or "illegitimate child" are degrading and are to be avoided.

People may use biased words because they forget or are unaware of the meanings. A challenge in using bias-free language is that meanings change. Sex-equality consciousness has challenged language that denotes male dominance. For years the use of male pronouns and other words did both openly and in subtle ways deliver messages of superiority and exclusion. Fortunately sexist language is being used less frequently today. Subtle examples of undermining females that in many cases have no overt sexist intention are references to a woman as "honey" or "sweetie" and to women as "girls" or "gals." Have you ever heard of a group of men referred to as "boys" or "guys?" What one is called is significant.

Nonsexist language is now taught and its use encouraged in classrooms, the work environment, and within the mainstream of society. For example, the word "chairman" is more appropriately "chairperson" or "chair," and because women have established nontraditional careers, firemen and policemen are now fire-fighters and police officers. Fair-minded men recognize that they would not like it if things were reversed and are positive about elimination of outdated sexist speech. Because anyone can suffer from biased language, its elimination is definitely necessary.

One difficulty in sensitivity is that individuals have various preferences and attach personal meanings to words. You may not know, for example, whether to refer to a person as Hispanic or Latino; white, Caucasian, or European American; black or African American. Students in a diversity class were enlightened when they were told by a female panel member: "My family and I live in the United States. I prefer to be called Mexican because I was born in Mexico. My children are Mexican Americans because they were born in the United States." If you want to know a racial or ethnic designation for someone, a wise solution is to ask an individual what she or he prefers.

College students sometimes struggle with what to call an instructor or professor and wonder whether one title is better than another. For example, some women professors prefer Dr. Smith; others want to be called "Mrs. Smith," whereas others are irritated with the "Mrs." title and prefer "Ms.," even if married.

Still others solve the problem by telling students to address them by a first name. Your best course of action is to let others know your preferences and to ask about theirs. A person who is skilled in interpersonal relations will keep abreast of new developments and be sensitive to all human beings.

English language learners (ELL). As a result of significant increases in immigration among people who speak other languages, many are in the process of learning English. Rather than criticize or ridicule anyone, consider that English is a difficult language filled with as many exceptions as rules. Then admire those who are working hard to master it. How many languages do you speak? Learning a second one is a definite asset.

Emotion-packed phrases. Inadvertently, you may use **emotion-packed phrases** (Walker and Brokaw, 1998), groups of words usually said as lead-ins to statements that carry an emotional punch. Some of these are:

After all I have done for you
 When I was your age
 You should know better
 After you have worked here as long as I have

Note that many emotion-packed phrases begin with “you” and can easily be reworded. Listen to yourself and to others. How many such phrases do you hear? They can turn off the listener or sidetrack a positive exchange, so try to eliminate as many as you can.

Disclaimers. An expression that denies or shrinks from responsibility is a **disclaimer**. A common one is “Not to change the subject, but.” The speaker has said that the intention is not to change the subject; however, he or she will do so anyway! Confusing? Instead, why not say, “I am going to change the subject,” or “I would like to change the subject for the moment.” Disclaimers may seem easier and less offensive; however, others can become annoyed or resentful of the indirectness. The key word in disclaimers is “but,” which is a way of saying yes and no in the same sentence (Satir, 1976). Here are some examples:

I love you, but I wish you would take better care of yourself.
 I am sick, but don’t worry about me.

These statements often leave the listener feeling uneasy and confused. A definite improvement is to substitute the word “and” for “but.”

Another example of a disclaimer is the “just in jest” remark. If there is negative reaction to a comment such as, “You are so slow, a turtle could get there faster,” the disclaimer is, “Just kidding.” Yet the person probably was not kidding. Disclaimers are ineffective ways of verbalizing.

Slang, colloquialisms, and vulgarity. **Slang** consists of terms that are popular at a given time. They are usually interesting and fun to use yet can become a problem if they are misinterpreted or overused. A job interviewer wrote on an

evaluation form: “I do not like the company referred to as ‘you guys’ as in, “What kind of products do ‘you guys’ sell?” Incidentally, the applicant did not get the job. Monitor your use of slang and be aware that it can cause problems. Informal folksy words and phrase are **colloquialisms**. They can add color to expressions yet can also be overused and misunderstood. An added problem is that they can create an unfavorable impression. For example, in the Midwest, the word “yes” is commonly replaced with “yeah.” In formal situations such as a job interview “yeah” sounds unprofessional. Others include “nope,” “ya don’t say,” “no kiddin’?” and “how ya doing?”

Vulgarity and the use of profanity have become commonplace. Relying too heavily on substandard expressions can leave others wondering about the extent of the speaker’s vocabulary. Also, swearing and crudeness do affect people’s sensitivities and can be offensive, so limit or eliminate vulgar and profane expressions. Keep in mind that patterns of expression are difficult to change from one situation to another. An applicant was embarrassed during an interview when he said, “People who do not give a damn annoy me.” He later said, “I swear a lot, but I was sure I could control it during a job interview.” He learned the hard way that positive language patterns, like all skills, require daily use.

Vocabulary and Grammar. People who are limited in vocabulary and accepted grammar are likely to express themselves poorly. In certain situations, their self-esteem will suffer as a result. I remember a period of time when my daughters and stepsons were in school and proper grammar was not “cool.” As a parent and a teacher, I managed to endure “ain’t” and “he don’t” and even “it do not make no difference” coming from the mouths of intelligent human beings! We purists were competing against the lyrics of music and words uttered by role models of the time.

Although perfection in language skills is not necessary, effective communication goes hand in hand with the ability to speak a language acceptably. If your vocabulary or grammar skills are poor, you can take advantage of courses or use self-study resources to improve. You might consider a refresher course in writing skills as well. When you use the best of the language, you are a better communicator.

Revealing Yourself: Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is defined as making the self known by revealing personal information. In doing so, people can know and understand each other. Individuals disclose verbally and nonverbally. The earliest research on self-disclosure revealed that women disclosed more than men. Unmarried participants revealed more to their mothers than to fathers, male friends, or female friends and married individuals shared more with their partners (Jourard, 1971).

Self-disclosure continues to be a focus of interest. Generally, women enjoy more personal levels of disclosure than do men; this holds true in both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships (Wood, 2001), although personality differences are extremely influential. After learning more about levels of self-disclosure, we will examine the benefits, obstacles, and steps that are involved (Fig. 9-1).

A word (or more) about E-Mail

Because face-to-face paralanguage and body language are nonexistent in e-mail communication, both clarity and effectiveness are at risk. These tips can help.

- Choose your words carefully. Try reading your message aloud if possible. Does it sound like what you want to say?
- Be specific—especially about names, places, dates, and times.
- If this is a business message, be brief. Realize that the receiver probably has many messages to read.
- Do not send a message unless you are relatively sure that the receiver will appreciate it or unless it is absolutely necessary. There are far too many forwarded messages circulating.
- Learn e-mail etiquette. For example, using capital letters often comes across as if you are yelling.

A recommended guide is *E-Writing: 21st Century Tools for Effective Communication* (Booher, 2001).

Figure 9-1

Degrees of Self-Disclosure

Just as all kinds of content can be organized into levels, self-disclosure also has its degrees. Identified by Glaser (1986), the following reveals what can be disclosed.

Basic data refer to biographical and demographic information: I am 22 years old. I was born in Denver, Colorado. I am attending college in Columbus, Ohio. I live in an apartment.

Preferences are likes and dislikes, pleasures and displeasures, what one would rather do or not do: I like pizza. I enjoyed going back to Colorado this summer. I would rather attend a small college. I do not like having two roommates. I love summer.

Beliefs consist of thoughts, opinions, and attitudes: I believe that young adulthood is a challenging time of life. I think that small colleges offer more individualized attention. In my opinion, educators are not paid enough.

Feelings are disclosures about emotions: I am proud to be in college. I feel sad when I think about moving to a new city. I was scared when I heard about the accident.

These degrees are arranged in order of least to most difficult to disclose, in general (see Fig. 9-2).

In most cases, basic data are risk free and relatively easy to reveal. Even though preferences can usually be disclosed with little risk, some people will challenge you. For example, have you ever told someone that you liked a certain kind of food and heard the reply, "That stuff? How could you like it?" Arguing over preferences seems trivial and unnecessary, yet you will find some people who seem to have difficulty accepting differences even about preferences.

Degrees of Self-Disclosure

Basic Data
Preference
Belief
Feeling

Figure 9-2

For a number of people, or in certain situations, beliefs may be more difficult to disclose than feelings. Both include a degree of risk and indicate a deeper level of disclosure. Thoughts and opinions, as pointed out in Chapter 7, are often verbalized in the closed style of communication. If the open style were used, beliefs would likely be more acceptable and, consequently, easier to reveal. Emotions can be hidden from others for a variety of reasons. Even if you are in touch with your feelings, they may be difficult to explain.

All relationships benefit from self-disclosure. The levels can be useful in checking out how open you are. Do others reveal all degrees to you? If they do not, do you know the reason? The depth of self-disclosure is generally an accurate reflection of the closeness of two people.

Benefits of Self-Disclosure

Matt frowns at Sue when she says, "I wish you would share more of yourself with me." "Why?" he asks. If Sue is well informed, she will be able to explain the benefits of self-disclosure. One reward has to do with knowing and understanding oneself. Each self-disclosing statement brightens the light of self-understanding. As you reveal your true self, you feel more honest, authentic, and validated. "This is who I am" can be an exhilarating feeling. Self-disclosure is usually a self-esteem builder.

Other benefits are related to the developmental areas of the self. In terms of health, a self-discloser seems to benefit. Inhibiting one's thoughts and feelings gradually undermines the immune function, the action of the heart and vascular system, and even the biochemical workings of the brain and nervous system. Not disclosing has been linked to the severity of asthma, diabetes, anorexia nervosa, and even pain thresholds. In an experiment, high self-disclosers showed significant drops in blood pressure compared to low self-disclosers (Pennbaker, 1997). Talking to others about disturbing aspects of life is relieving.

Sharing can be relieving. Stress and certain emotions can be managed positively by self-disclosure. Erin described a change.

I was negative, and now I am positive. I think it is because I am being more open and honest. I am willing to share my "real" self now. I am glad because people now are starting to look at me from the inside to the outside.

Specific benefits of self-disclosure were identified in a study of lesbians. Degree of disclosure was related to overall levels of social support (Jordan and Deluty, 1998).

Building close relationships is also an outcome of self-revelation. In fact, achieving intimacy is impossible without disclosure of self. **Social penetration theory** (Altman and Taylor, 1973) explains that close relationships develop in terms of increasing self-disclosure. Among dating couples, self-disclosure is a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction (Meeks, Hendrick, and Hendrick, 1998). As discussed in Chapter 5, expression of feeling is beneficial. "None of us who value our relationships can afford to retreat from communication on an emotional level" (Branden and Branden, 1982, p. 66). Self-disclosure has been related to positive outcomes for supervisors in a work setting (Ladany, Walker, and Melincoff, 2001) and perceived understanding in stepchild-stepparent relationships (Martin, Anderson, and Mottet, 1999).

A major plus is that self-disclosure makes relationships interesting. Think how boring life would be if people conversed only on basic data and preference levels. Disclosure affirms the other by saying, "I care enough about you to share my personal self."

Finally, when people self-disclose, the communication process is improved. Individuals can understand and provide feedback to each other and create an open, accepting environment. Self-disclosure is usually reciprocated. There is a relationship between what persons are willing to disclose and what others reveal to them. The openness of one person can begin a sharing process that creates a close relationship.

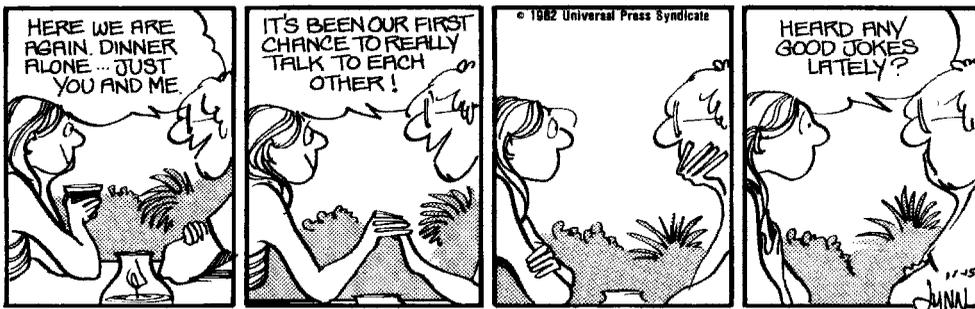
Obstacles to Self-Disclosure

Even if Sue convinces Matt that the benefits are well worth his consideration, he still may resist self-disclosure or find it difficult. He has a great deal of company in this regard. Why? The most common reason is fear: "I am afraid that others will laugh at what I believe." "I was hurt before when I revealed how I felt, and I'm not going to let that happen again." "I told her how proud I was of my final grade, and she put me down for bragging." The threat of rejection is frightening. "But, if I tell you who I am, you may not like who I am, and it is all I have" (Powell, 1969, p. 20). Fear of intimacy could be involved.

Most people receive "parent" messages telling them to not self-disclose. "Do not let others know about your financial situation," "Your sex life should be private," and "What would the neighbors think if they knew?" are common "parent" messages. Knowing what type of communication sharing is for "family" only and what type is appropriate outside of the family is important. Culture has an effect on self-disclosure. A study found that Asian Indians tend to suppress rather than express feelings. Being exposed to American culture somewhat modified their perceptions and expressive patterns (Hastings, 2000). Gender roles are a part of the culture. As mentioned earlier, the stereotypic masculine role is "at odds" with self-disclosure. Men tend to be less self-disclosing especially about their emotions and weaknesses (Dolgin, 2001), which is unfortunate for both them and their partners (Fig. 9-3).

For Better or For Worse

by Lynn Johnston



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Figure 9-3

Before You Self-Disclose

- Is my level of disclosure appropriate in this situation?
- Do I trust the person to whom I am self-disclosing?
- For what reason am I self-disclosing? Is it a positive one, or am I being manipulative, petty, or cruel?
- Are the risks worth my self-disclosure? What can be gained versus lost? Will my self-disclosure unreasonably burden another person?
- Is this the most opportune time and place to self-disclose? Is the atmosphere conducive to a positive interchange?

Positive answers give you a “green light” to self-disclose.

Figure 9-4

Personal circumstances and attitudes can be barriers. A study revealed that lonely individuals negatively evaluated deeper levels of disclosure and viewed them as risky and undesirable (Rotenberg, 1997). People with low levels of **interpersonal trust**, defined as the expectancy that another’s word or promise can be relied upon, would likely have more difficulty in self-disclosing. Obviously, after trust is developed, people are more likely to disclose.

How to Self-Disclose

After a consideration of the benefits and a removal of obstacles, people who want to feel more authentic and to develop healthy relationships will elect to self-disclose. The critical question for many is how to do so. Before disclosing, honestly answer the questions in “Before You Self-Disclose” (Fig. 9-4).

After deciding to self-disclose, the question becomes how to do so. The use of “I” statements is highly recommended. The open style lends itself to being more positive. Body language in harmony with the verbal message is important. Stating that you think open communication is important while maintaining a closed body position is confusing. Being clear, specific, and descriptive are invaluable. Vague disclosures may be worse than none at all. Importantly, telling too much and monopolizing the conversation are very likely to turn off any listener. After disclosing, be ready to accept feedback and keep the exchange open.

Giving and Receiving Compliments

Like breaths of fresh air, **compliments** are comments of admiration and praise; in the TA framework, they are verbal positive strokes. Compliments can initiate a relationship. On his first day at work, Bill was complimented by Rick, a coworker. The expression of praise started a conversation. After a few weeks, the two were socializing with each other. Compliments definitely enhance relationships and build a bond between individuals.

Recommendations for Giving Compliments

Do you give compliments? Although opportunities for expressions of admiration and praise are plentiful; too often such opportunities are overlooked. Stinginess in compliment giving may come from a tendency to take others for granted or an inability to recognize a situation in which a compliment would be appropriate. Hesitation can come from shyness, embarrassment, or concern about how the compliment will be received. If you have any difficulty, consider how valuable a compliment can be. Jennifer was depressed and had decided to quit school. Then she was complimented about her class participation by an instructor and praised by another student for her note-taking abilities. “Those compliments were like a tonic to me,” she said. “I had lost faith in myself, and all at once it was restored. I changed my mind about quitting school.”

Compliment-giving guidelines. Raise your awareness level to the point that you notice praiseworthy situations. Everyone has a positive quality. Do not confine your compliments to people you know. A clerk in the department store, a taxicab driver, a waiter or waitress, a person behind the voice on the phone—all are candidates for compliments. Being sincere is important. Phoniness and insincere flattery are likely to be detected and will be disturbing. If you do not truly admire something, you are better off saying nothing.

Vary the reasons for your compliments. People usually compliment others on the basis of appearance. Certainly, people appreciate this type of praise. However, you can also compliment people on other qualities and behaviors. “I enjoyed your comments in class,” “I thought your work on the project was terrific,” “I admire your positive attitude,” and “I love your laugh” are generally appreciated by recipients.

When you compliment someone, check to see that your words, paralanguage, and body language are all saying the same thing. Without meaning to do so, you can express a genuine compliment in a tone of voice that sounds negating. Beware of giving “backhanded” compliments. These are comments that start out sounding positive and end with a stinging remark, a question, or a qualifier that implies they aren’t wholly true. Some examples are: “You drew a beautiful picture *for a change*,” “I *cannot believe* your room is clean,” and “*How did you manage* to throw such a great party?” Can you see why these need to be reworded or are better left unsaid?

A positive behavior is to be a third-party compliment giver. What can you do if you hear a positive comment about someone? Passing it on to that individual is almost as good as giving it originally. You can also add to it. For example, “Craig said that you are a great golfer. I can see why he thinks so. Shooting par on that hole was not easy.”

Thinking about yourself as a compliment giver and realizing the benefits of these positive comments can encourage you to increase both their number and their variety. You might want to set a goal of doing so. Your acquaintances, friends, and family members will benefit as will you.

Responding to Compliments

“I enjoy giving compliments, but I feel funny getting them,” was Jordan’s honest comment. How do you react to a compliment? The comment is, “I really like your suit.” Do any of these responses sound like you?

“This old thing? I have had it for years.”

“I hate it. I just pulled it out because everything else was dirty.”

“Your taste in clothes is slipping.”

“Really?” (while wrinkling your nose)

Rejecting or denying compliments is common, and the potential for damage is extensive. A compliment rejection is essentially an insult. It is as if the positive comment is hurled back into the face of the giver. Once rejected, a giver will be reluctant to deliver more compliments. A relationship can be harmed because one individual did not graciously receive what was offered. People with low self-esteem are often guilty of this practice and so do not benefit from a sincere comment of praise. Finally, the communication climate can become negative. Imagine a black cloud settling in because the compliment giver feels diminished.

How to receive compliments. Receiving a compliment in a positive way is simple. A “thank you” is enough. If you want to add more, some possibilities are “Thank you, I really appreciate that,” “Thank you, I have been feeling a little down, and you helped,” and “Thank you, I did spend a lot of time on the project.”

If you honestly do not agree with the comment, you can choose to keep quiet or you can mention it without a rejection. For example, you really do not like the suit you are wearing, and you receive a compliment. A possible honest response is, “Thank you. I had my doubts about it, and it’s nice to know that you think it looks good.” You may wonder about returning a compliment with a compliment. In response to “I like your suit,” someone could say, “I like your outfit, too.” If the response is sincere, no harm will result from a mutual admiration exchange.

Checking Your Perception

Picture a person standing on the roof of a house with arms waving over the head. Three people from across the street look at the scene. Later, each tells about the incident.

Mary to her husband: “This guy was acting really crazy. He was on top of the house and waving his arms like he was trying to scare someone.”

Tom to his children: “A man was trying to get my attention by waving his arms at me. I thought he was in trouble, so I came into the house and called 911. I have not found out yet what was going on.”

Ed to a friend: “I did not have my glasses on, but it looked like a woman up on the roof who was ready to jump. She was yelling really loudly, too.”

Each person offered a different perception of the situation.

What is perception and how does it affect the communication process? **Perception** is a mental process of creating meaning from **sensory data** that we receive through stimulation of our senses. A message is carried to the brain, which then organizes and interprets the data. In perceiving, our brains are like computers. Once “turned on,” we take in data through the senses of sight, sound, smell,

taste, and touch. The perception process begins when sensations are received (like raw data being fed into a computer) and continues as the brain quickly interprets. It tries to make sense out of the sensory data (as a computer computes) and attaches meaning to the input.

In differentiating between sensory data and interpretation, think of a courtroom scene. On the witness stand, a person is allowed to give only the facts, or sensory data: “I *saw* the suspect drive away in a red car.” If a witness begins to add interpretation such as, “I *thought* that he had come out of the bank and was probably fleeing from a robbery,” a good attorney will object. Interpretation is not allowed as evidence.

In interpersonal relationships we receive most information from seeing and hearing, although touching and smelling can also be involved. Perception affects communication and all other aspects of human relationships. If perception were always accurate, several interpersonal difficulties could be avoided. But is perception correct in all situations? At the beginning of this section, three people described the same experience differently. Because of uniqueness, no two people’s perceptions are ever exactly the same, and our perception in any given situation can be inaccurate.

Effects on Perception

For what reasons could perception be faulty? What we perceive is affected by such factors as background, self-esteem, personality, values, age, sex, physical condition, mental health, and expectations.

Expectations do influence what you actually see and hear. If you expect to see or hear a certain thing, that may well be your sensory data. A custodian, who was cleaning an office, was facing a window. An office manager came in, sat at her desk, and said, “You are really working late. I will bet your girlfriend or wife does not like that very much.” To her surprise, a female voice replied, “Actually it is my husband who minds!” Expecting custodians to be male led to incorrect sensory input.

In addition, the senses and their abilities to gather accurate information differ from person to person. Limitations can lead to errors. Even though well-adjusted people are generally capable of receiving accurate sensory data, there are no guarantees. Ask a police officer about an investigation of an accident scene! Usually, more than one account is heard. Even if the sensory data are correct, what about comprehension? Have you ever been misinterpreted? Have you ever misunderstood another person? The potential for errors is enormous. In fact, misperception causes much of the conflict and difficulties in relationships. You may often have heard or said, “That is not what I meant!”

As an example, imagine the following scenario.

You are in the cafeteria at school or work, and a friend who is usually outgoing walks past your table. She glances at you and then turns away.

You saw what she did, so the sensory data are correct. Recognize, however, that another person might have “seen” it differently. Next is your interpretation. Think of as many possibilities as you can.

Perception Checking

1. **Give sensory data:** Exactly what did you see, hear, or smell? Include who, when, and where if possible. Use behavioral terms in your description. Paint a picture in words. Use any of these: “I noticed,” “I saw,” “I observed,” “I was told,” “I heard,” “I overheard,” “I smelled,” “I touched.”
2. **Give interpretation:** What did the sensory data mean to you? Interpretation is delivered tentatively, not as if it is the truth or factual. Don’t say, “I wonder if.” State in a positive way what you think. Use any of these: “I thought,” “it seemed to me,” “to me it appeared,” “I took that to mean,” “I believe,” “that led me to believe or think.”
3. **Check both sensory data and interpretation:** The question checks the accuracy of your sensory data and perception. At this point you are not asking whether the person wants to talk, needs help, or the like; nor do you offer to give help yet. Use any of these: “Is that right?” “Am I correct?” “Is that how it is or was?”

Figure 9-5

She is mad at me.
 She did not really see me or recognize me.
 She just does not want to talk right now.
 She is stuck up.

Which is correct? One cannot know at this point, and a person skilled in communication and interpersonal relations will want to clarify it. A first step is to be aware that you do not *know* for sure. Even though evidence may point to one interpretation more than to another, the human experience is full of inconsistencies.

Perception Checking as a Communication Technique

When you have doubts about either the accuracy of sensory data or your interpretation, a communication technique called **perception checking** can be helpful. This process involves describing the specific sensory data you have received and the interpretations you are making about those data (Glaser, 1986). In cases in which you have no doubts as to accuracy, the technique would be senseless. For example, if someone says, “I do not like you,” and punches you in the face, you are receiving a clear message (Fig. 9-5).

Perception checking includes three steps. First, describe your sensory data—what you have actually seen and heard or, in some cases, smelled, tasted, or touched. It is important to be specific and descriptive. Second, give an interpretation of the sensory data. What did they mean to you? Third, ask a question to check the accuracy of the sensory data and interpretation. Ideally, “I” statements are used in the first two steps, whereas the third step is framed as a question.

In using perception checking, certain phrases or ways of asking the question will probably sound more natural to you than others. If the language seems awkward at first, with use you will become comfortable with it.

In the situation in which your outgoing female friend has glanced at you and then looked away, you can use perception checking as follows:

1. "In the cafeteria this afternoon when you walked past my table, I saw you glance at me and then look away." (sensory data)
2. "It appears that you were upset for some reason." (interpretation)
3. "Am I right?" (question that checks both)

The friend can then confirm, modify, or deny either your sensory data or your interpretation or both.

You may be wondering why going through all three steps is important. Let's consider other possibilities such as a "why" question. "Why are you mad at me?" This is an assumption that your interpretation is accurate, and it may not be. How do you react to most "why" questions? Generally, people are put on the spot and feel defensive. Many "why" questions are not asked to find out the real answer. As one man commented, "Whenever my folks asked 'why,' I knew they did not approve of what I had done, and I was going to hear about it."

Another poor way to begin a discussion with your friend is what many people do: "You are mad at me, aren't you?" or "You do not like me any more, I guess." An even worse approach would be to say, "I *know* you are mad at me." These leave out all sensory data and leap directly to conclusions. Instead of checking, you have already made an interpretation, concluded that you are correct, and now your friend is being told the reason for her behavior. In many cases, people just assume that their interpretation is true, become upset, and do not say anything. "I will treat her just like she treated me" is their way of handling the situation. Too often, relationships suffer because people do not openly share their sensory data and interpretation. Perception checking is direct and honest. Unless you are speaking to a troubled person, perception checking will be nonthreatening. The goal is to clarify a situation and, in most cases, the person will respond in such a way that this is possible.

Using Dimensions of Awareness

Perception checking is used to clarify your sensory data (sensations) and interpretation (thoughts): You and your relationships can benefit from sharing even more. Although you may be unaware of them, five key pieces of information are present in a given situation (Miller et al., 1988). Let's examine each of them.

- **Sensations:** Verbal and nonverbal input from people's actions, as well as subtleties of what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch.
- **Thoughts:** The meanings, interpretations, or conclusions from the sensations. Interpretations are not "the way things are." They are the way you put your world together—the way you make sense out of data.
- **Feelings:** Emotional responses, which are important to share in most interpersonal relationships. Review the information about expressing feelings in the section on degrees of self-disclosure.
- **Wants:** Intentions, desires, and wishes for yourself, for others, and for your relationship together.

- **Actions:** Behaviors consisting of past, present, and future actions. These are, or will be, observable, and they indicate commitment.

Confusion between wants and future actions is common. The difference is that intentions do not carry a definite commitment to act and are only desires. You may share what you have done, are presently doing, or will do.

Becoming aware of the five dimensions in any interaction and then expressing these to another person indicate a willingness to reveal what you know. Using “I” statements is important. Following is a way to use dimensions of awareness in the situation of the friend in the cafeteria.

(Sensing) “This afternoon as you walked by my table in the cafeteria, I saw you glance at me and then look away.”

(Thinking) “It seemed to me that you were upset.”

(Feeling) “I am concerned about this.”

(Wanting) “I would like to straighten this out.”

(Acting) “In fact, I asked Michele whether she knew if something was wrong. She did not, so I am checking it out with you.”

You may not want to express each dimension in exactly the same way or order presented here. You can begin with any dimension and use wording that is comfortable for you. For example,

I am concerned because I noticed that you looked away from me when you walked by my table in the cafeteria this afternoon. I was sure you had seen me, and it led me to think that you are upset with me. In fact, I even asked Michele whether she knew if you were upset and she did not. I would like to straighten this out, and I have time to talk about it right now if you do.

If you are thinking that this is too involved and will be time-consuming, ask yourself how worthwhile clarity is. Being partly aware is a major problem in the communication process. You owe it to yourself and to your relationships to become as fully aware as possible.

Thinking about these dimensions can help you discover areas of self-*un*awareness. For example, you may be able to communicate four dimensions and recognize that your feelings are not clear—even to you. Learning the skills initially is the easiest part; putting them into practice is the most difficult. Usually, it helps to announce that you want to share your dimensions of awareness and would like the other person to do so too.

Delivering Criticism

A life in which criticism is unnecessary may sound wonderful; however, such an ideal world does not exist. Because you will undoubtedly deliver criticism, learning how to do so in a constructive, positive way is advisable. A first step is to ask yourself the reason for criticizing. Is it justifiable? Is it potentially beneficial? Think about whether the criticism is destructive or constructive, and speak only if you believe you can help.

Preparing yourself by thinking about what you will say, and even rehearsing it, is highly recommended. Picking a suitable time and place, if possible, is also a good idea. Be aware of body language and paralanguage. When you deliver a critical remark, use “I” statements. “You” statements will most likely elicit a defensive, combative response. Directing attention specifically and descriptively to behavior or a situation you do not like is more acceptable than being critical of the person. You can choose to use perception checking or, more completely, the dimensions of awareness to increase the chances of a receptive response. Another suggestion has been called the “Mary Poppins rule” (Levine, 1988). Based on the idea that “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” the aim is to make the criticism more acceptable by prefacing it with a sincere compliment. For example, “Professor Martin, I enjoy your lectures a lot; however, I do not think that the examination policies are as fair as they could be.” Using the person’s name, also, can be affirming. Check the following steps in criticizing a sloppy roommate.

1. Begin with a sincere positive comment.
“Rhonda, I really like you and have a lot of fun living with you.”
2. Specifically describe the situation and behaviors. Again, draw a picture with your words.
“We had agreed to keep our apartment clean and neat, yet your clothes are in the living room, and I have cleaned up the mess in the kitchen for the last four days.”
3. Acknowledge the other’s thoughts, feelings, and personal situation.
“I realize that you have been so busy and maybe just forgot.”
4. Give reasons for your criticism and tell exactly what you want and expect.
“I am frustrated, and I do not want this to become a bigger problem. I do expect you to keep our agreement.”

Unless Rhonda is an extremely defensive person, this criticism will not offend her and should get the results you desire. If it does not, you can at least be satisfied that you have expressed your criticism in an open, nonthreatening way.

Responding Effectively

Criticism is almost impossible to avoid and can be difficult to receive. If constructive and delivered in a nonthreatening manner, it is easier to handle; however, sizable numbers of critical statements are made negatively and for reasons that are not evident. Whether the criticism is deserved or not, a response determines, to a great extent, the course of the exchange and possibly the relationship itself.

Inappropriate Responses to Criticism

Eliminating ineffective or negative responses can clear the way for responses that work in your behalf. In general, individuals respond either aggressively or passively or with a combination of the two. An aggressive method is one of counter-attack. A person feels wronged, justifiably or not, and then lashes out at the perceived attacker. The criticism may be stopped for the moment; however, the aggression is resented, and the situation is only worsened. In the workplace, an aggressive response will probably get you fired.

Passive responses are ones that apologize and acquiesce; they can be delivered verbally or nonverbally. Silence is often a form of surrendering to criticism. If you are a “peace-at-any-price” person, passivity may seem inviting. Nevertheless, the potential damages to your psychological well-being and to the relationship are seldom worth the price. Meek receivers of criticism also invite further attacks.

A combination of the two occurs when an individual responds passively and then acts aggressively at a later time: “Yes, dear, I know I have neglected paying the bills, and I will make sure it does not happen again,” is the agreeable response. The bills get paid, and two checks are returned from the bank for insufficient funds. The person who was criticized either purposefully or unconsciously has found a way to get back at the critic. Because this behavior is essentially manipulative and indirect, a relationship can be badly damaged.

Other possibilities are denial and defense. Excuse making is a far too common response. Usually, the criticized person recognizes that the criticism is appropriate yet still finds it difficult to accept. “Yes, *but*” is an irritating response. Blaming other people or external situations is part of excuse making and makes an individual appear immature and irresponsible.

Positive Responses to Criticism

If your goals are to maintain or increase your level of self-esteem, preserve or improve the relationship, and make the situation better for yourself, positive responses to criticism are the key. “The effective way to respond to criticism is to use an assertive style. It does not attack, surrender to, or sabotage the critic. It disarms the critic” (McKay and Fanning, 2000, p. 162). The key is to not overreact and make matters worse (Fig. 9-6).



Figure 9-6 During a performance evaluation, constructive criticism is given in a positive way.

Source: Photos.com.

Agreement with Criticism. Even if you realize that the criticism is justified, you can still feel somewhat defensive and hurt. Hence, you may respond in a way that will make the situation worse for you. Instead, follow these steps using “I” statements.

1. Agree with the criticism, using such phrases as “I realize,” “I agree,” “I know,” and “I understand.”
2. Optional: State the reason briefly and be sure your reason is fact, not excuse. (This step is optional because you may not want to tell the “why.”)
3. State what you plan to do to prevent future occurrences or to solve the problem.

Pretend you have been late for work for the past few days, and your supervisor has criticized you. A common reaction is to make an excuse or place blame elsewhere. Refrain from both! Instead, use a response that is refreshing and much more likely to bring about positive results, such as one of the following.

1. I know I have been late, and I can understand your concern.
2. I have had several frustrating problems with my car (optional).
3. I am taking it in to be fixed tonight, and I plan to be careful about my punctuality in the future.

Or, if you do not want to mention your car, skip step 2, and in the third step just say, "I will correct this problem in the future." Dramatically promising that you will *never* be late again is unwise because it happen again.

You can also agree with part of the criticism. You might understand the person's interpretation and want to clarify. For example, if your supervisor said, "You seem to have lost interest in doing a good job," you can respond, "I can see why you would think that because I have been late the past few days. I have not lost interest. My being late is due to other factors that I plan to correct."

In certain instances, humor can be used to defuse the situation. When former Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey was running for Congress, a loud critical voice from the audience said, "I do not know why I should vote for you. During one whole year when you were governor, I do not remember anything you did except entertain that actress, Debra Winger." Kerrey smiled, rubbed the side of his head, and replied, "I know what you mean. Sometimes I do not remember much else about that year either." The crowd broke into laughter, including the critic, and what could have become a negative situation, became a positive one for Senator Kerrey.

Not understanding the criticism. Frequently, criticism is vague, and you honestly do not understand what the person means. Emotionally, this is difficult to handle. You are probably inclined to defend yourself even if you do not know the reason for the criticism. Resist the temptation! The following response technique, using "I" statements, is particularly helpful.

1. State your lack of understanding. Use phrases such as "I do not understand why you think that," "I am confused as to why you said that," or "I do not know why you have that impression."
2. Tell the person what you need to increase your level of understanding. Use phrases such as "I would like you to explain to me why you think that way," "I would appreciate your telling me what I have done or not done to lead you to think that," or "I would like to know what you are basing that on."

Now the critic is in the responding position. You have been honest and politely requested what you want while giving yourself time to calm down if needed. You wait for the explanation, which usually gives you enough information to respond specifically. Interestingly, if the critic had used either perception checking or dimensions of awareness, you likely would not need more information. Vague criticism usually does not include sensory data.

To illustrate this response, pretend a coworker has said to you, "You do not like to work with me anymore." You have no idea why she believes this because she has not given you her sensory input. You can use a two-step response and say:

1. "I do not know why you think I do not like to work with you."
2. "I would appreciate your telling me what has caused you to think that."

You now wait to hear what led to her interpretation, which she has poorly stated as fact. Then you can deal with a concrete description of her sensory data.

Surprisingly, the person may not be able to provide what you have requested. The response may be, “Well, I do not really know. I just do not think you like to work with me.” This is frustrating; however, you are wise to continue to behave positively. You can ask key questions such as: “Can you give me some examples?” “Can you specifically describe what I did?” In some cases, you may have an idea of the reason for someone’s criticism and can guess. Be careful about this, however. For example, you may respond, “Is it because I told the supervisor that you had not finished your share of the project before you left yesterday?” If you are not certain that this is known by the coworker, you will be in for a surprise when she says, “No, I did not know you did that, and now I am really upset!” If you have probed and still have not received any useful sensory data, you can conclude by saying, “I do not feel that way; however, until you can give me some specifics, I am not able to offer more than that.”

Not agreeing with the criticism. Emotionally, the most difficult situation to deal with is one in which you disagree with the criticism. The person has given you sensory data either initially or after you have requested clarification, and you do not agree. A positive response is still the best one.

1. State your disagreement: “I do not agree,” “I guess we do not agree on this,” or “I do not see it the way you do.” Be sure that you are expressing this in a nonthreatening way and keeping your voice calm. Usually, a quick “I disagree” sounds aggressive and is not recommended.
2. Either use your own sensory data to give reasons for your disagreement or simply end the conversation. Your choice will depend on what is at stake, what chances you think you have of coming to some sort of an agreement, and other extenuating factors such as fatigue levels and time constraints. You can suggest a future discussion as well as an acknowledgment that disagreement is not always negative.

Other tactics may be helpful. You may opt to neither agree nor disagree. Instead, you simply acknowledge criticism and let it go. For example, a parent says to you, “Your apartment (or house) is such a mess, I do not know how you stand to live here.” You can reply, “Yes, it is a mess,” or “It is amazing how I stand it.” Other useful phrases are: “You *may* be right” and “That could be true.” If you feel strongly about the criticism, acknowledgment isn’t advisable. However, in many situations, criticism can be like “water off a duck’s back” if you allow it to be.

Another choice is to delay. If you are completely surprised by the criticism and, especially, if your reaction is anger, you can express your confusion or surprise and state that you want to think about it for awhile. A good response is, “I am not sure how to reply. I am going to think about it, and then I will get back to you.”

By backing up for a moment to examine our feelings, rather than simply reacting from panic, we can most effectively sort out and respond to the realities of the critical message. (Butler, 1992, p. 165)

Positive responses to criticism are not difficult to learn. They lead to a feeling of enhanced self-esteem and of being in control and serve to move relationships in a positive direction. Checking your skills in the communication exercise in Reflections and Applications will help.

Effective Responses to Metamessages

Metamessages, comments with a double-level meaning, were discussed in Chapter 8. Metamessages are usually hidden criticisms, yet they may not be. Recipients of such messages cannot be sure until they check. First figure out what you think the message means. The second step is to state what you think the person is saying and ask whether you are correct. Imagine that your mother says, "You are *so* busy these days." The emphasis on "so" creates a metamessage. The statement means more than just that you are busy. Is concern about your welfare being expressed, or does your mother mean that you do not spend enough time with her? Whichever you decide, state clearly and tentatively, "I wonder if you are worried about me" or "It seems to me that you do not think I am spending enough time with you." You can phrase it as a question such as, "Do you mean that I am not spending enough time with you?" Or you can choose to ignore it; however, realize that a relationship based on openness and positiveness is then in jeopardy.

Ways of Responding to Offensive Language Patterns

Being able to respond assertively to offensive language patterns is a worthwhile skill. "I hate it when people make bigoted remarks. I just do not know what to say," said one individual. Because a response is usually preferable to silence, knowing what to say makes a major difference.

- Assertively state your opinion; in doing so, you set limits.

"I do not appreciate profanity."

"I do not approve of those kinds of jokes."

"I do not like to hear others being put down."

- Tell how you feel.

"I feel resentful when you start your sentence with 'Let me tell you.'"

"I get frustrated when you make frequent references to 'when I was your age.'"

"I am hurt by those kinds of comments."

- Politely challenge with a question.

"Can you clarify that?"

"Is that your opinion or is it based on research?"

"What do you mean?"

- Suggest another alternative.

"As far as I'm concerned, talking positively about people is much better than being so negative."

"I would prefer that you did not say, 'You have no right to feel that way.' I do have a right to my feelings."

"I would like to talk about something else."

Too often, individuals simply react and respond with whatever happens to come to mind, not realizing what impact their response has on both the communication climate and the interaction. Being prepared with positive responses is an important part of communicating and deserves attention.

Verbal Abuse: What to Do

When a person is told over time that his or her perceptions and feelings are wrong, the challenge is learning to respond to verbal abuse. This type of abuse does not leave physical evidence; however, it is just as painful, and recovery takes much longer (Evans, 1996). Prolonged verbal abuse damages the spirit and reduces joy and vitality.

The first step is awareness of verbal abuse. The book *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond* (Evans, 1996) describes possible characteristics and different types of abusers, some of which may surprise you. One not often recognized is verbal abuse disguised as a joke. This kind of abuse “cuts to the quick, touches the most sensitive areas, and leaves the abuser with a look of triumph” (Evans, 1996, p. 93). Some examples are “You could not find your way out of a paper sack,” “You would lose your head if it was not attached,” “What can I expect from a blonde?” The abuser makes a disparaging remark and, if challenged, will often accuse the “victim” of having no sense of humor. Common is the rebuke or “Can’t you take a joke?” “I was just kidding.”

Any verbal abuse tactic requires assertive responses. Allowing yourself to be verbally abused is belittling and will lead to more unhappiness in the future. After

REFLECT AND APPLY

Reflect

- ◆ See if you can think of your own examples for each of the five levels of content given at the beginning of the chapter.
- ◆ Think of different examples of dialect variations.
- ◆ What are three benefits of self-disclosure?
- ◆ For what reason(s) would you think a significant other no longer cares about you? Be sure you are coming up with sensory data to support your thoughts.
- ◆ How many interpretations can you come up with for this situation? You receive a low evaluation on a project at work.

Apply

- ◆ Give two sincere compliments to two different people.
- ◆ Look and listen. Then provide three examples of sensory data beginning with “I saw,” “I noticed,” “I heard.”
- ◆ Ask other people how they would interpret the situation of receiving a low evaluation at work and see how many interpretations agree with yours.
- ◆ Pretend you have heard something that is offensive. Select a type of response given in the book that you are comfortable using. What exactly would you say?

recognizing a pattern of verbal abuse, you can start to set limits: “I will not accept jokes that put me down or belittle me.” The abuser may not honor your limits, but you have other choices. Finding a supportive counselor and asking the abuser to go with you is one possibility. If you decide that the abuse is not going to end, you are well advised to end the relationship. Handling the abuse with positive, assertive responses may not be the only step you take; however, it is the beginning of finding the respect you deserve.

Whether you are responding to or initiating an exchange, learning about content and then practicing can greatly improve what you say. Many people, after gaining awareness of content, say, “I did not realize so much was involved. I used to just open my mouth and talk. Now I think about it first!” Awkwardness is to be expected initially. Do you recall learning to ride a bicycle, to water ski, or to type? Your first attempts probably felt clumsy, and you may have thought that you would never learn. If you persisted, it was likely you wondered how it could have seemed so difficult at first. Learning communication skills is similar. After exposure and practice, less intense thinking is needed, the skills become natural, and you will wonder at your initial lack of ability.

You are now ready to complete the communication exercises in Reflections and Applications. If you do well on the ones in Chapters 7 and 8, you deserve a pat on the back. Keep in mind that content does make a definite difference in all interactions and especially in close relationships, and you influence the course of a relationship by what you say.

LOOKING BACK

- Communication pitfalls can be avoided by awareness of semantics, dialect, bias-free language, second-language challenges, emotion-packed phrases, disclaimers, slang, colloquialisms, vulgarity, vocabulary, and grammar.
- Self-disclosure can be organized into degrees or levels that move from basic data through preferences to beliefs and feelings.
- Compliments are comments of admiration and praise given to a person. Increasing the number of sincere compliments you give, doing so in positive ways, and receiving compliments graciously improve relationships.
- Sensation and perception include taking in sensory data and making interpretations. Individuals can err in the accuracy of either the initial input or the meaning they attach to it.
- Techniques such as perception checking and verbalizing dimensions of awareness aid in understanding and clarifying situations.
- Effective responses are usually as important as initial comments. Learning positive responses to criticism, metamessages, and offensive language patterns is a beneficial interpersonal relations skill.

It is certain that a relationship will be only as good as its communication.

—John Powell