Your Communication in Groups

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

• Use verbal symbols to clearly express yourself about group tasks and activities
• Use nonverbal symbols to build positive group relationships
• Explain how verbal and nonverbal symbols work together to form a complete message system
• Identify listening pitfalls and employ strategies to overcome them
• Provide examples of task communication appropriate for a group’s task or activity
• Use relational communication to create connections with other group members
• Describe the interdependence of task and relational messages

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 communic-
ated (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 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 experi-
ences with the other person, and even previous experiences with the task. Meaning
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.

**Words and Meanings**

Because verbal communication relies on language and because you have more
receivers (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. **Abstract** words paint broad generalizations whereas concrete words
help the sender 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. 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.

**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.
Moreover, some 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 20-page detailed recommendation with an executive summary. 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

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. When other group members respond to these direct verbal requests, interdependence is created among members, which can be observed in the pattern of language used in that group.

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 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 Fund-raising 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 verbal 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.

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 and influential 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 and influence turns from positive to negative.

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. Some group members may hesitate to ask questions or to seek clarification, so 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. Avoid words that can evoke strong emotions from other group members or that have negative connotations. For instance, labeling someone 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**

Meaning can also be 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 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 or 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. 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 use of nonverbal cues that 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.

Even though you may be unaware of your own nonverbal communication in a group, you are interpreting other members' nonverbal behaviors.
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 can wear a sweatshirt monogrammed with the sorority’s insignia. Artifacts can also provide cues for starting 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.

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. Nonverbal cues provide key information about the relational interests of group members. These effects are more likely to converge and be expressed by all group members in situations where more intense emotions (e.g., cheerful enthusiasm, hostile irritability) rather than less intense emotions (e.g., serene warmth, depressed sluggishness) are displayed (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). Thus nonverbal communication can become an emotional contagion that consciously and unconsciously further influences group member behavior (Barsade, 2002).

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 you 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: (a) that members are developing
greater positive regard for one another and (b) 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 them.

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 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. If possible, 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

Verbal and nonverbal communication are intertwined. However, the two message systems are not always in agreement. 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. 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 & Fillon, 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, 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.

**Listening Pitfalls**

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 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 task is to recommend ways to improve a city park and playground facility. The mayor requested that the group include 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, 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, my son, 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.

PLANNING DEPT. 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, 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.

Improving Listening

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.

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, 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.
Chapter 2  Your Communication in Groups

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 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.

In settings with friends, relatives, and romantic partners, listening has been equated to being heard by others (Halone & Pecchioni, 2001). That is, individuals want others to really hear what is being said and to put their thoughts aside so as to be able to concentrate on what is being said to them. Individuals also expressed a desire for others not just listen but also respond to what is being said. Overwhelmingly, individuals reported that they wanted to be understood and wanted others to pay attention to what was being said. Thinking of listening in this way underscores the relational consequences of listening, and provides a framework for how people conceptualize others as competent listeners.

**Task Communication**

*Task communication* is comprised of the verbal and nonverbal messages that are instrumental to the accomplishing of group tasks and activities. In essence, task communication is the social tool created and used by group members to perform their tasks (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999). Broadly, task messages are those in which group members offer or request direction or action for how to engage the task, advance or ask about a belief or value that is relevant to the task, and report or request factual observations or experiences (Bales, 1950, 1953). Thus, task messages often focus on what group members know, what group members can do, or what level of effort they can or will expend. However, group members must be persuasive in getting others to respond positively to these offerings (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999).

Task messages are instrumental in that they direct the activities of the group (Strijbos, Martens, Jochems, & Broers, 2004). For example, task messages coordinate a group’s time (e.g., “Let’s meet again next week, same time”), coordinate group activity (e.g., “Who will make an inventory of all our resources?”), describe the group’s goal (e.g., “Tim asked us to consider alternatives to providing volume discounts”), and identify when differences about the task or goal exist (e.g., “There are several proposals on the table”). As a result, task messages are frequently evaluated relative to the quality of the group’s outcome.

Given the wide range of tasks and activities that groups can engage in, the type of task or activity dictates what counts as a task message (Poole, 1983). If the group is a problem-solving group, then task messages that introduce, develop, critique, modify, and integrate and synthesize ideas would be the mechanisms through which the group solves the problem. However, if the group is a football team, then its task messages are likely to be instructions or talk about procedures. Can you imagine the quality of play if members of a football team introduced, developed, critiqued, modified, and then integrated ideas on the playing field? The context of the group and the type of task or activity dictates what is a logical task message.
Recall that all groups have task and relational dimensions. Thus, even a family group can communicate task messages. These messages may be problem solving when the family is planning a vacation, or instructional and procedural when the mom is directing the family in cleaning up the garage.

**Relational Communication**

When we think of our best and worst groups, our memories often hinge on the relationships we developed with other group members. Even if a group's primary goal is task-oriented, it's the positive and negative feelings about our relationships that stand out. Simply put, the development and maintenance of relationships enhance or detract from how a group's task or activity is carried out. Thus, **relational communication** refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric or social reality of a group (Keyton, 1999b).

At their most fundamental level, relational messages (a) demonstrate friendliness or unfriendliness, (b) show tension and anxiety or reduce it, and (c) demonstrate agreement or disagreement with what is said (Bales, 1950, 1953). More specifically, relational messages are those that emphasize attraction, dislike, conformity, deviance, cooperation, connection, autonomy, similarity, flexibility, rigidity, cohesion, withdrawal, consensus, domination, stereotyping stigmatization, and satisfaction—all which affect how relationships among group members develop (Barker et al., 2000). Frequently, relational messages are evaluated for the way in which they influence group member satisfaction or cohesion.

First experienced in our family groups, relational messages remain important because they provide us with feedback we use in creating and adjusting our identities and how we fit into groups. For example, a group of six alumni from the University of Kansas meet before each home basketball game to have dinner. Then they carpool to the game where they sit together. In fact, that's how the three couples were introduced. The couples did not know one another before they happened to be assigned seats in the same row. For more than 10 years, the couples in this group have enjoyed the company and companionship of one another. The wives would often get together socially for lunch and shopping and the husbands often went together to a local bar to watch the game when the team played out of town. But this year, the university changed how it assigned seats. Now seats are assigned based on how much money ticketholders gave to the university's athletic fund. As a result, the couples are now scattered throughout the arena. One couple has choice seats at midcourt; one couple sits close to the floor but at one of the corners; the third couple has seats fairly well up into the first tier. The couples still get together for dinner and carpool to the game. But their inability to interact with one another at the game influenced the strength and quality of their relationships and how they identify with one another as a group. Their inability to share the game experience together and to communicate about it while the game was being played diminished the groupness, or group feeling, the couples enjoyed. Watching the game together is this group's primary activity, the reason these couples bonded, and the primary stimulus of the group's
Communication. Eating dinner together and carpooling were activities that supported their game experience. Without sharing the game together and missing the opportunity to relate to one another while the game was being played, the group identity faltered.

While all groups use relational communication, they vary widely in quantity and quality. Family and friendship groups use relational messages more frequently whereas a basketball team and a group of firefighters use relational messages less frequently. However, some task groups provide unique contexts for relational communication to occur. For example, a group of women taking a self-defense class reported that learning these skills as a group provided the opportunity to reveal their vulnerabilities and their past traumas, which led them to taking the class. Self-disclosing in this way created an intense cohesiveness among group members. Still, group members recognized that “it’s a task-oriented group really, it’s not a friendship group. We got together to do a task” (Fraser & Russell, 2000, p. 406). Some groups, like social support groups, have distinct types of relational messages, such as communicating to heal and to vent emotion (Cawyer & Smith-Dupre’, 1995). Regardless of the context, these affective or expressive messages, positive or negative, create connections and social influence among members, which result in a group’s climate.

Integration of Task and Relational Messages

Task and relational messages are distinct, they are also interdependent. Failure to respond to task messages impedes a group’s performance of its task or activity. Failure to respond to relational messages impedes a group’s sense of identity. A group is a social setting, and, as such, requires group members’ attention to relational messages even when the group is primarily focused on a task. The influence of relational messages is so strong that it is often the predictor of group members’ commitment to the task or activity of the group (Bayazit & Mannix, 2003).

While it would simplify things to think of task and relational messages as direct or overt, many of the messages we send in group settings are not as direct as the task message “Jason, are you going to do the group’s report?” and the relational message “You know, I like you, Jason.” Frequently, our interpretation of what constitutes the task or relational component of a message is based on how a message is said. Think of the many ways in which the two messages to Jason could be delivered. The first message delivered loudly with sarcasm would clearly give Jason an idea of how his membership was valued in the group. The second message delivered with direct enthusiasm may compel Jason to take on a task for which group members had not made an assignment. Thus, the nonverbal aspects of a message are very important and are frequently the cause of miscommunication. In the instance of the first example, the leader of the group believes she sent a task message to Jason, but Jason interprets her sarcastic tone of voice and cues primarily in on the relational message that she doesn’t like him.

Despite this complexity, relational messages among group members help the group create a shared history and can create a supportive or positive context in
which its task or activity is performed. The importance of relational communication has been underscored by research that discovered that interpersonal problems were reported as a primary reason for work group ineffectiveness (Di Salvo, Nikkel, & Monroe, 1989). Likewise, members of decision-making groups reported that affiliating with other members is a predominant activity in their meetings (Scheerhorn, Geist, & Teboul, 1994).

Group Communication Outcomes

As a result of task and relational messages, group members can create synergy. **Synergy** exists when the performance of a group goes beyond the capabilities of individual group members (Schweiger & Sandberg, 1989). When synergy occurs, individual group members feed off one another’s energy and interest. How does synergy occur? Plainly, effective and appropriate communication among group members promotes positive synergy (Salazar, 1995). In essence, group members can accomplish a great deal because their communication about the task does not threaten their relationships. Thus, reciprocally, strong relationships among group members allow the group to work effectively on the task.

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

Interaction among group members strengthens collective efficacy or the belief that the group can be effective (Guzzo, Yost, Campbell, & Shea, 1993). In other words, group member efficacy is the sense an individual member has about the group and its capabilities. Efficacy can only develop if members are sharing their ideas about the group’s task or activities. Individual members’ positive beliefs about their group’s capabilities can result in group potency, or the group’s collective belief that the group can be effective (Guzzo et al., 1993).

Does group potency make a difference? Yes, when comparable groups are evaluated against the same standards, the group with the strongest and most positive beliefs about its task capabilities and group member relationships performs better, while groups whose members have dissimilar beliefs perform worse. Thus, it’s not enough for one member to believe that the group can be successful (Jordan, Field, & Armenakis, 2002). It is the collective belief that is important, and this belief is created through group interaction. More importantly, potency develops over time through group members’ relational communication (Lester, Meglino, & Korsgaard, 2002). As members recognize the potency of their group, individual members’ collective efficacy about the group begins to exceed their self-efficacy, or their beliefs about their own abilities. Because group members are interdependent and working on a group goal, it becomes clear that group success depends less and less on any one member, and more on the contributions of all group members (Baker, 2001). Thus, member sentiment turns from “I can do this” to “We can do this.”

As you might suspect, when potency is high, group members are more motivated to work to accomplish the group task. Moreover, groups with high potency develop strong expectations for their continued success. As a result, these groups have higher goal aspirations because members believe that the group can perform. This belief, in turn, actually strengthens its ability to perform, which leads to group performance that is self-fueling (Hackman, 1990).

However a group or team comes together, members’ initial interactions have an enduring effect on the group (Hackman, 1990). Thus it is essential that a group get off to a good start. If the initial meetings are positive and productive, the group will establish a solid base on which to draw if it has a crisis. But if the initial meetings are unproductive, group members may not be able to draw on the resources of the group to survive a crisis later on. Thus a group must establish its structure and develop an identity by acknowledging an interdependent goal. And to be successful, the group needs an adequate number of members who satisfy the group’s task and relational needs.
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 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, consuming 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. Listening pitfalls are prevalent in groups, and all group members are occasionally guilty of poor listening. Competent listeners are group members who really hear what others say, work to understand the sender, and can respond appropriately.

Task communication is comprised of the verbal and nonverbal messages that are instrumental to the accomplishing of group tasks and activities. Although a group’s task or activity dictates what counts as a task message, generally speaking, group members use task messages to offer or request direction or action for how to engage the task, advance or ask about a belief or value that is relevant to the task, and report or request factual observations or experiences. Thus task messages often focus on what group members know, what group members can do, or what level of effort they can or will expend. Task messages are frequently evaluated relative to the quality of the group’s outcome.

Relational communication refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric or social reality of a group. Group members use relational messages to demonstrate friendliness or unfriendliness, show tension and anxiety or reduce it, and demonstrate agreement or disagreement with what is said. Relational messages affect how relationships among group members develop. Thus, relational messages are evaluated for the way in which they influence group member satisfaction or cohesion.
All groups, regardless of their task or activity, use both task and relational communication. Failure to respond to relational messages impedes a group’s performance of its task or activity. Failure to respond to task messages impedes a group’s sense of identity. A group is a social setting, and, as such, requires group members’ attention to relational messages even when the group is primarily focused on a task.

Synergy exists when the group performs beyond the capabilities of individual group members. Interaction among group members strengthens individual members’ collective efficacy—the belief that the group can be effective—but it can only develop if members are sharing ideas about the group’s task or activities. When group members’ beliefs are similar and positive, group potency, or the group’s collective belief that the group can be effective, emerges. Because group members are interdependent and working on a group goal, member sentiment turns from “I can do this” to “We can do this,” creating a positive and self-fueling effect on task and activity performance.

**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. Think of the next group or team you will attend. What types of task and relational messages would be appropriate for this setting? What types of task and relational messages do you want other members to communicate to you? How do these task and relational messages influence the group’s effectiveness?