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Introduction to Communication Theory



A recent advertisement for AT&T Wireless has a bold headline that asserts, “If only communication plans were as simple as communicating.” We respectfully disagree with their assessment. Mobile communication plans may indeed be intricate, but the process of communicating is infinitely more so. Unfortunately, much of popular culture tends to minimize the challenges associated with the communication process: We all do it, all of the time. Yet one need only peruse the content of talk shows, personal ads, advice columns, and organizational performance reviews to recognize that communication skills can make or break an individual’s personal and professional lives. Companies want to hire and promote people with excellent communication skills. Divorces occur because spouses believe they “no longer communicate.” Communication is perceived as a magical elixir, one that can ensure a happy long-term relationship and can guarantee organizational success. Clearly, popular culture holds paradoxical views about communication: It is easy to do yet powerful in its effects, simultaneously simple and magical.

The reality is even more complex. “Good” communication means different things to different people in different situations. Accordingly, simply adopting a set of particular skills is not going to guarantee

success. Those who are genuinely good communicators are those who understand the underlying principles behind communication and are able to enact, appropriately and effectively, particular communication skills as the situation warrants. This book seeks to provide the foundation for those sorts of decisions. We focus on communication theories that can be applied in your personal and professional lives. Understanding these theories—including their underlying assumptions and the predictions that they make—can make you a more competent communicator.

➤ WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

This text is concerned with communication theory, so it is important to be clear about the term *communication*. The everyday view of communication is quite different from the view of communication taken by communication scholars. In the business world, for example, a popular view is that communication is synonymous with information. Thus, the communication process is the flow of information from one person to another (Axley, 1984). Communication is viewed as simply one activity among many others, such as planning, controlling, and managing (Deetz, 1994). It is *what* we do in organizations.

Communication scholars, on the other hand, define communication as *the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning* (Conrad & Poole, 1998). As such, communication both reflects the world and simultaneously helps create it. Communication is not simply one more thing that happens in personal and professional life; it is the very means by which we produce our personal relationships and professional experiences—it is *how* we plan, control, manage, persuade, understand, lead, love, and so on. All of the theories presented in this book relate to the various ways in which human interaction is developed, experienced, and understood.

➤ WHAT IS COMPETENT COMMUNICATION?

Because we believe that one of the goals of studying communication theory is to make you a better communicator, we should articulate more clearly the nature of communication competence. Research indicates that communication competence is most often understood as achieving a successful balance between effectiveness and appropriateness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). *Effectiveness* is the extent to which you achieve your goals in an interaction. Did you get the raise? Were you able

to convince a subordinate that timeliness is important? Did you persuade your spouse to clean the bathroom? *Appropriateness* refers to fulfilling social expectations for a particular situation. Did you assertively ask for the raise, or was it a meek inquiry? Were you insistent or wishy-washy when discussing your employee's tardiness? Was your interaction with your spouse demonstrative or did you passive-aggressively pile dirty towels on the floor? There are many cases in which a person is effective without being appropriate; consider a job applicant who lies on a resume to get a job for which he or she is unqualified. That person might be very effective in getting the job, but is such deceit appropriate? On the other hand, many times people are appropriate to the point of failing to achieve their goals. For example, a person who doesn't wish to take on an additional task at work, but says nothing because he or she fears causing conflict, might be sacrificing effectiveness for appropriateness. The key is that when faced with communicative decisions, the competent communicator considers how to be *both* effective and appropriate. We believe that the theories described in this book will help you achieve your communication goals by providing indication of both what should be done as well as how you should do it.

☞ WHAT IS THEORY?

The term *theory* is often intimidating to students. We hope by the time you finish reading this book that you will find working with theory to be less daunting than you might have expected. The reality is that you have been working with theories of communication all of your life, even if they haven't been labeled as such. Theories simply provide an abstract understanding of the communication process (Miller, 2002). As an abstract understanding, they move beyond describing a single event by providing a means by which all such events can be understood. To illustrate, a theory of customer service can help you understand the poor customer service you received from your cable company this morning. Likewise, the same theory can also help you understand a good customer service encounter you had last week at a favorite restaurant. In a professional context, the theory can assist your organization in training and developing customer service personnel.

At their most basic level, theories provide us with a lens by which to view the world. Think of theories as a pair of glasses. Corrective lenses allow wearers to observe more clearly, but they also impact vision in unforeseen ways. For example, they can limit the span of what you see, especially when you try to look peripherally outside the range of the frames. Similarly, lenses can also distort the things you see,

making objects appear larger or smaller than they really are. You can also try on lots of pairs of glasses until you finally pick one pair that works the best for your lifestyle. Theories operate in a similar fashion. A theory can illuminate an aspect of your communication so that you understand the process much more clearly; theory also can hide things from your understanding or distort the relative importance of things.

We consider a communication theory to be *any systematic summary about the nature of the communication process*. Certainly, theories can do more than summarize. Other functions of theories are to focus attention on particular concepts, clarify our observations, predict communication behavior, and generate personal and social change (Littlejohn, 1999). We do not believe, however, that all of these functions are *necessary* for a systematic summary of communication processes to be considered a theory.

What does this definition mean for people in communication, business, and other professions? It means that any time you say a communication strategy *usually* works this way at your workplace, or that a specific approach is *generally* effective with your boss, or that certain types of communication are *typical* for particular media organizations, you are in essence providing a theoretical explanation. Most of us make these types of summary statements on a regular basis. The difference between this sort of theorizing and the theories provided in this book centers on the term *systematic* in the definition. Table 1.1 presents an overview of three types of theory.

Table 1.1 Three Types of Theory

Type of Theory	Example
Commonsense theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never date someone you work with—it will always end badly. • The squeaky wheel gets the grease. • The more incompetent you are, the higher you get promoted.
Working theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience analysis should be done prior to presenting a speech. • To get a press release published, it should be newsworthy and written in journalistic style.
Scholarly theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of violations of expectations depend on the reward value of the violator (expectancy violations theory). • The media do not tell us what to think but what to think about (agenda-setting theory).

The first summary statements in the table describe what is known as *commonsense theory*, or theory-in-use. This type of theory is often created by an individual's own personal experiences or developed from helpful hints passed on from family members, friends, or colleagues. Commonsense theories are useful because they are often the basis for our decisions about how to communicate. Sometimes, however, our common sense backfires. For example, think about common knowledge regarding deception. Most people believe that liars don't look the person they are deceiving in the eyes, yet research indicates that this is not the case (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985). Let's face it: If we engage in deception, we will work very hard at maintaining eye contact simply *because we believe that liars don't make eye contact!* In this case, commonsense theory is not supported by research into the phenomenon.

A second type of theory is known as *working theory*. These are generalizations made in particular professions about the best techniques for doing something. Journalists work using the "inverted pyramid" of story construction (most important information to least important information). Filmmakers operate using specific camera shots to evoke particular emotions in the audience, so close-ups are used when a filmmaker wants the audience to place particular emphasis on the object in the shot. Giannetti (1982), for example, describes a scene in Hitchcock's *Notorious* in which the heroine realizes she is being poisoned by her coffee, and the audience "sees" this realization through a close-up of the coffee cup. Working theories are more systematic than commonsense theories because they represent agreed-on ways of doing things for a particular profession. In fact, these working theories may very well be based on scholarly theories. However, working theories more closely represent guidelines for behavior rather than systematic representations. These types of theories are typically taught in content-specific courses (such as public relations, media production, or public speaking).

The type of theory we will be focusing on in this book is known as *scholarly theory*. Students often assume (incorrectly!) that because a theory is labeled as *scholarly* that it is not useful for people in business and the professions. Instead, the term *scholarly* indicates that the theory has undergone systematic research. Accordingly, scholarly theories provide more thorough, accurate, and abstract explanations for communication than do commonsense or working theories. The downside is that scholarly theories are typically more complex and difficult to understand than commonsense or working theories. If you are genuinely committed to improving your understanding of the communication process, however, scholarly theory will provide a strong foundation for doing so.

☞ EVALUATING THEORY

The final topic of this chapter is evaluating theory. Earlier we suggested that all theories have strengths and weaknesses; they reveal certain aspects of reality and conceal others. An important task that students and scholars face is to evaluate the theories available to them. We are not talking about evaluation in terms of “good” versus “bad” but evaluating the *usefulness* of the theory. Each of you is likely to find some of the theories presented in this text more useful than others. Such a determination is likely due at least in part to your own background and experiences, as well as your profession. We would like to challenge you to broaden your scope and consider not just the usefulness of each theory to you personally but the usefulness of the theory for people’s personal and professional lives in general.

A number of published standards can be used to evaluate theories (e.g., Griffin, 2003; Littlejohn, 2002; West & Turner, 2000). All are appropriate and effective tools for comparing the relative usefulness of a given theory. Because this text is geared toward working professionals, however (or those who wish to soon be working in the profession of their choice), we believe that the following five criteria best capture the way to assess the relative usefulness of communication theories in the communication, business, and related professions. Note that we are talking about the *relative* usefulness of the theory. We are not talking about either/or, good or bad, weak or strong. Instead, we hope you look at these distinctions as *continua* that range from very useful at one end to not particularly useful at the other end. A description of these criteria is in Table 1.2.

The first area of focus is *accuracy*. Simply put, the best theories correctly summarize the way communication actually works. Recall, however, that we are referring to scholarly theories. As such, we do not mean accuracy in terms of whether the theory accurately reflects your own personal experience (although we would hope that it does!). Instead, when we use the term *accuracy* we are suggesting that systematic research supports the explanations provided by the theory. Thus, in assessing this quality, you should look at research studies that have used the theory and see whether the research supports the theory or fails to find support for it.

A second way to evaluate theories is *practicality*. The best theories can be used to address real-world communication problems; in fact, Lewin (1951) said, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (p. 169). Clearly, there are some profound theories that have changed the way we understand the world that aren’t actually *used* by most

Table 1.2 Criteria for Evaluating Theory

Area of Evaluation	What to Look For
Accuracy	Has research supported that the theory works the way it says it does?
Practicality	Have real-world applications been found for the theory?
Succinctness	Has the theory been formulated with the appropriate number (fewest possible) of concepts or steps?
Consistency	Does the theory demonstrate coherence within its own premises and with other theories?
Acuity	To what extent does the theory make clear an otherwise complex experience?

people on a daily basis (Einstein’s theory of relativity, or Darwin’s theory of evolution, for example). In terms of *communication* theories, however, theories that are accurate but can’t be used in everyday life are not as good as theories that have great practical utility. For example, a theory that can help a person make better communicative decisions in his or her interactions with coworkers is better than a theory so abstract that it cannot be used by an individual in daily communication. Thus, a theory with more applications is better than a theory without practical uses. In assessing this criterion, you should look not only for how the theory has been used in the research literature but also whether the theory has made the leap to professional practice.

Succinctness is the third way to evaluate a good business or professional communication theory. Succinctness refers to whether or not a theory’s explanation or description is sufficiently concise. Importantly, succinctness does not mean that the theory is necessarily easy to understand or has only a few short steps; because the world is complex, theories trying to explain the world are often fairly complex as well. Instead, what we mean by succinctness is whether the theory is formulated using as few steps as possible. The “three bears” analogy works here. Theories that have extra steps or include variables that don’t help us understand real-world experiences would be considered overly complex. Theories that do not have enough steps, that don’t

delve beneath the surface, or that don't have enough variables to understand real-world problems are too simple. Theories that include no more and no less than necessary to understand a phenomena thoroughly are considered just right; they are appropriately succinct. The best way to think of succinctness is to compare how much of the communication situation is explained by the theory in proportion to how many concepts are being used to explain it. The larger the situation and the smaller the number of necessary steps or concepts, the more succinct the theory.

The fourth way to evaluate a theory is to consider its *consistency*. The most useful theories have both internal and external consistency. By *internal consistency*, we mean that the ideas of the theory are logically built on one another. A theory that proposes at one point that cooperation among team members guarantees success and at a different point proposes that competition is more effective than cooperation has a logical flaw. Similarly, theories that "skip" steps do not have much internal consistency. A theory predicting that age is related to the experience of jealousy and that one's expression of jealousy affects the future of the relationship, but then fails to tell us how the experience of jealousy is related to the expression of jealousy, has a logical gap. As such, it does not have strong internal consistency.

External consistency, on the other hand, refers to the theory's coherence with other widely held theories. If we presume that the widely held theories are true, then the theory under evaluation that disagrees with those believed supported theories also presents a logical problem. As such, the notion of consistency, whether internal or external, is concerned with the logic of the theory. The most useful theories are those that have a strong logical structure.

The final area for evaluation is *acuity*. Acuity refers to the ability of a theory to provide insight into an otherwise intricate issue. Earlier we said that theories evaluated as "succinct" are not necessarily easy to understand because the real world is often complicated. A theory that explains an intricate problem, however, is of greater value than a theory that explains something less complex. Think of acuity as the "wow" factor. If, after understanding the theory, you think "wow, I never considered that!" the theory has acuity. If, on the other hand, you think "no duh," the theory does not demonstrate acuity. To illustrate, a theory that explains a complex problem, such as how organizational cultures can influence employee retention, is a more useful theory than a theory that explains a relatively straightforward problem, such as how to gain attention in a speech. Those theories that explain difficult problems show acuity; those that focus on fairly obvious problems demonstrate superficiality.

☞ CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed the popular perception of communication, which suggests that the communication process is paradoxically simple yet powerful. We defined communication as the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning. We then turned our attention to communication competence, indicating that competent communicators are those who can balance effectiveness and appropriateness. Next, we discussed the nature of theory. The distinctions between commonsense theories, working theories, and scholarly theories were addressed. Finally, we provided a means by which scholarly theories of communication can be evaluated, including accuracy, practicality, succinctness, consistency, and acuity.

Case Study 1: Evaluating Groupthink

Whether or not you know the details of the theory, it's likely that you've heard the term *groupthink*. Developed by Janis (1972), the notion of groupthink has bridged the gap from the realm of academics into popular culture. We performed a LexisNexis search of the term and found literally hundreds of hits during the past year, with the term being referenced in major newspapers, magazines, and even newsletters. Clearly the concept is being used—but is it being used the way that Janis intended? Read the following summary, and evaluate the theory using the criteria developed in this chapter.

Groupthink is a dysfunctional decision-making process that happens when group members are so focused on making a unanimous decision that they fail to fully analyze a problem (Janis, 1982). As such, groupthink was designed to explain and predict how bad decisions are made by groups. At its core, the notion of groupthink represents a failure of the group to demonstrate critical thinking. When groups "go along to get along," the end result of the decision-making process is likely to be less effective than if group members question the information at hand, being careful to look at the problem from a variety of perspectives.

Janis (1982) articulated three *antecedent conditions* to groupthink. According to Janis, these preexisting conditions make it more likely that groupthink will occur. Note that the existence of the antecedent conditions does not guarantee that groupthink will occur. Instead, these are what Janis calls "necessary but not sufficient" conditions. The antecedent conditions are high cohesion, structural flaws, and situational characteristics.

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First, *cohesion* refers to the degree of connection between group members, or a sense of solidarity (Janis, 1982). Because groupthink emphasizes the preservation of group harmony, a high degree of cohesion is necessary for groupthink to occur. Yet Janis's notion that cohesion might engender bad decision making is novel. Think about your own workplace; in how many "team-building" activities have you taken part? If you are a full-time student, how many of your classes have started with "icebreakers" so that the class might feel more connected to each other? Typically, workplace cohesion is viewed positively, but Janis warns that cohesion might make people reluctant to "rock the boat"; yet rocking the boat might be necessary to make the best possible decision.

The second antecedent condition, *structural flaws*, refers to problems with the way the group is organized (Janis, 1982). Janis identified four specific structural flaws—any one of which might lead to groupthink. First, *group insulation* means that the group is somehow isolated from the larger world. Perhaps they meet so frequently with each other and so infrequently with others outside the group that they are disconnected from the larger system. Perhaps the group hasn't had direct experience with the problem at hand. This insulation might lead to an inability to process adequately all of the information necessary to make an effective decision. The second structural flaw is *biased leadership*. If the leader already has his or her mind made up or has a personal stake in the decision, group members might defer to the leader simply because of the power differential, regardless of whether the leader's solution is good. Third, a *lack of procedural norms* can lead to groupthink. Not having a process in place for how to make a decision can happen either because the group has not taken the time to create the process or because the group fails to follow the process. In either case, following a standard process can prevent the group from inadvertently missing a key component of the decision-making process. Last, too much *homogeneity* is problematic. Homogeneity refers to similarity; group members who are very similar—in background, values, or beliefs—are less likely to challenge each other's ideas.

The third and final antecedent condition is *situational characteristics* (Janis, 1982). In short, groupthink is more likely to occur in times of *high stress*. This high stress might come from pressures from outside the group. Groups that work in the pharmaceutical industry experience stress from Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requirements. Television network executives experience pressures from advertisers. Sometimes external forces place undue pressure on the group through operating constraints, threats,

or legal requirements. High stress might also come in the form of *time pressures*; the more rapidly a decision has to be made, the less likely that all possible solutions have been adequately studied.

Stressors don't always come from outside the group, however (Janis, 1982). Groups that have experienced *recent failures* may lose confidence in their decision-making ability, and the loss of confidence might create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The final category of situational characteristics is *moral dilemmas*; if a group feels that the viable alternatives represent ethical challenges, they are more likely to fall prey to groupthink. Consider a situation where a group can come up with only three solutions to a problem, but two of the three are deemed ethically inappropriate—the group is likely to pursue the third option, regardless of how good it might be.

Again, these three antecedent conditions are necessary—but not sufficient—for groupthink. In other words, all three conditions must be present to some degree for groupthink to occur; however, simply because these circumstances exist doesn't guarantee the occurrence of groupthink. Instead, Janis (1982) argued that you have to examine how the group operates to observe *symptoms of the groupthink process*. He identified eight symptoms that are grouped into three categories: overestimation of the group, closed-mindedness, and pressure toward uniformity.

The first classification of symptoms falls into the category known as *overestimation of the group* (Janis, 1982). Overestimation occurs when group members have an inflated view of the group's abilities. Two specific symptoms to look for are *illusion of invulnerability* (a belief that the group won't or can't fail) and a belief in the *inherent morality of the group* (a belief that because the group is good, the decisions the group makes have to be good). Note that both of these symptoms are representative of a level of unwavering confidence in the group and its abilities. As such, group members might not feel it is necessary to critically analyze the decisions being made.

Janis (1982) labeled the second category of groupthink symptoms *closed-mindedness*. These symptoms demonstrate polarized thinking, which means viewing the world in extremes. Things are perceived either as good or bad, right or wrong. If they are good, they are wholly good; if they are bad, they are wholly bad. If a decision is right, it must be completely right. Two specific instances of this category are stereotyping out-groups and collective rationalization. First, *stereotyping out-groups* refers to the process of demonizing other groups and their leaders. Frequently, images of good and evil are invoked, such as former president George W. Bush's 2002 designation of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the "axis of evil."

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When other groups are portrayed as uncompromisingly bad, it is easier to justify decisions that might put those groups in jeopardy. *Collective rationalization* means that the group members tend to justify their decisions by talking themselves into it. As an example, consider a group that spends only 5 minutes coming up with a solution and 25 minutes discussing why they are right in making the decision. Rather than critically analyze the decision, group members come up with a litany of reasons to defend why it's a good decision.

The third and final symptom of groupthink is organized around the notion of *pressure toward uniformity* (Janis, 1982). When groupthink occurs, it is not only because the group has an inflated view of themselves or because they demonstrate polarized thinking; it is also because individual group members actively suppress critical thinking. *Self-censorship* means that group members tend to keep their mouths shut when experiencing doubts. Often they feel as though everyone else is "on board" with the decision, so they are afraid to go out on a limb with their concerns. This tendency also highlights the *illusion of unanimity*, which means that group members perceive that consensus has been reached, even if it really hasn't. As such, silence tends to be interpreted as consent. In fact, *self-appointed mindguards* are careful not to present any contrary information, even if they know it exists; in other words, a self-appointed mindguard engages in self-censorship. If someone actually does question the decision, a group experiencing groupthink will often place *pressure on dissenters*; challenges to the group are squashed.

Janis developed his theory by analyzing six national political decisions, ranging from the positive (the Cuban Missile Crisis) to the negative (the Bay of Pigs). Despite how frequently the theory is referenced in both the academic and professional press, however, relatively little empirical research has sought to test the theory. At best this research has suggested limited support. Flowers (1977), Leana (1985), and Fodor and Smith (1982) tested part of the groupthink model and found support for those areas studied. Both Moorhead and Montanari (1986) and Ahlfinger and Esser (2001) found support for the proposition that groups with biased leaders were more likely to discourage dissent and fall prey to the illusion of morality, but in their studies such groups actually considered more alternatives, not fewer, as the theory would predict.

In his review of the theory, Baron (2005) concludes that Janis was "wrong about the antecedent conditions he specified . . . not only are these conditions not necessary to provoke the symptoms of groupthink, but they

often will not even amplify those symptoms" (p. 228). Yet, as Baron argues, the theory remains ubiquitous because it rings true for many people who have experienced faulty decision making: "The symptoms and mechanisms described by the model seem familiar to us. They echo group experiences we have experienced in our own social interactions" (p. 227). He concludes that the experience of groupthink accurately captures reality but that the theory does not accurately explain that reality. Perhaps the reason for this is conceptual ambiguity. Longley and Pruitt (1980) suggest that the antecedents and symptoms are not clearly distinguished from each other, making the theory unnecessarily complex. "A theory should be a logical progression of ideas, not a grab bag of phenomena that were correlated with each other in a sample of six cases" (Longley & Pruitt, 1980, p. 80).

Questions for Consideration

1. How accurate is groupthink? What evidence do you have to support your evaluation?
2. How practical is groupthink? Use the Web to see how the theory has been used.
3. Is the theory appropriately succinct? Or is it overly simple or overly complex? Why do you make this judgment?
4. Is groupthink consistent with other theories about group communication? Does it demonstrate internal consistency? Why or why not?
5. Does groupthink demonstrate acuity? Does it demonstrate an ability to explain a difficult real-world problem? Why or why not?