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Communicating in Small Group

Principles & Practices

STEVEN A. BEEBE JOHN T. MASTERSON

COMMUNICATING IN SMALL GROUPS

Principles and Practices

Fifth Edition

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PREFACE

e are pleased that the first four editions of *Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* continue to be praised and widely used both by teachers and by students. Our goal for over 15 years has been to present a digest of essential principles and practices that are relevant, practical, and useful, yet based on both classic and cutting-edge research. We appreciate the opportunity to continue our partnership with those of you who teach group communication.

This book is written to serve as the primary text for a college-level course. Instructors of such courses have many options in selecting a text. Some texts adopt a primarily theoretical perspective. But presenting theory without helping students apply principles can result in informed yet unskilled group members. Other texts emphasize skills to the exclusion of theoretical frameworks. While students often clamor for techniques and skills to enhance their ability to work with others, such approaches do not give students principles to guide their newfound applications. Skills alone will not give students inventive options in managing the multiple challenges and opportunities of collaborating with others. The fundamental premise of the fifth edition of this book remains the same as in earlier editions: Effective group communication requires knowledge of both the principles that help us explain and predict group communication, and the practices that foster application. As in previous editions, we draw on a variety of theoretical perspectives to achieve our goal. Our philosophy is that a singular theoretical perspective does not adequately introduce students to the multitude of paradigms that are used to help unravel the mysteries of group communication, teamwork, and collaboration.

We have designed our text to provide learning options both for teacher and for students. In our fifth edition, we continue to distill major conclusions in review boxes that help students clinch key ideas. Our refined "Putting Principles into Practice" section at the end of each chapter makes an even greater attempt to answer the "So what?" question about the principles and practices we have identified. Improved and updated pedagogical features such as chapter objectives, a glossary, discussion questions, chapter-end activities, case studies, and exercises are integral parts of our partnership with instructors in teaching group communication principles and practices and providing opportunities for students to think critically about them.

While retaining the lively, engaging writing style that students have appreciated in previous editions, we have updated several content areas throughout the book and included new references to the best small group communication research conclusions that we could find.

Changes in this edition are evident from Chapter 1 through our concluding chapter. For example, we begin the book with a new discussion of communication to anchor

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our definition of small group communication. Chapter 1 also includes a new discussion of individualism and collectivism and of the essential elements of a competent small group communicator. In Chapter 2 we have added a new discussion of symbolic convergence theory; we also draw students' attention to the effect new technology is having on group deliberations. In fact, we refer throughout the book to the role of such technologies as e-mail, video conferences, and other media. Another even more prominent theme is the effects of culture, gender, and human diversity on group deliberations. We have included new information about culture and gender differences in the chapters that discuss group relationships, nonverbal communication, conflict, leadership, and other areas in which new research conclusions are helping us understand the role of these factors on collaboration and teamwork. Other new additions or substantive revisions include:

- An explicit acknowledgment that group communication may occur even when people are not meeting face to face; this reflects the increased prominence of technology linking people in collaborate deliberations.
- A new perspective for distinguishing between primary and secondary groups.
- More explicit qualification of research conclusions that are primarily applicable to North Americans.
- Crisp, brief, yet interesting new examples sprinkled throughout the text to illustrate key principles.
- A new discussion of high- and low-context, and high- and low-contact cultures and group communication.
- Expanded discussion of the use of technology and electronic data bases as sources of information needed for group discussion.
- A new discussion of how to avoid reasoning fallacies when solving problems and making decisions in groups.
- Revised discussion of group problem-solving and decision-making approaches.
- A new framework for balancing group structure and interaction when presenting prescriptive methods of enhancing group performance.
- A new integration of problem solving steps and tools in Chapter 8.
- A new discussion in Chapter 9 of how to deal with difficult group members, as well as more explicit suggestions for managing pseudo-, simple-, and ego-conflict.
- The latest research conclusions about leadership in small groups.
- Recent research applications of gender and leadership in small groups.
- A revised approach to discussing applications of group principles and practices in organizations in Chapter 11.
- A simple, yet powerful perspective for understanding and improving group meetings.
- Additional material about the role of small groups in achieving quality products and services.
- Expanded coverage of teamwork theory and applications throughout the text.
- Revised and expanded instructor's manual.

We are grateful to the many individuals who reviewed earlier editions of the book and offered excellent revision suggestions. This is an improved book because the following people offered constructive and detailed commentary about our work:

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We have again been blessed by a skilled and professional editorial support team at Addison Wesley in preparing this new edition. Our acquisitions editor, Cynthia Biron, was a strong supporter of our work. We look forward to working with Diedre Cavanaugh, our new editor at Addison Wesley. Our development editor, Leslie Taggart, provided outstanding editorial leadership in keeping two busy authors on track and on target by managing a multitude of editorial details and by her prose-polishing skill. Julie Tesser, our Addison Wesley art and photo researcher, did an excellent job of selecting new visual images to enliven the text and keep it contemporary and visually appealing. Kwon Chong, editorial assistant at Addison Wesley, helped us manage many of the logistical needs we had in producing this volume. We also thank our colleagues and students at Southwest Texas State University and the University of Miami for their assistance, support, and suggestions. Stephanie Ludwig and Russ Wittrup at Southwest Texas State University offered helpful feedback that shaped several of our discussions of theory and skills. Maria Kharcheva, research assistant at Southwest Texas State, helped locate research sources and track down details. Manuscript typist Rhonda Brooks and administrative assistant Sue Hall, both at Southwest Texas State, again provided outstanding support. We also want to acknowledge the expertise of our friends and colleagues Dennis and Laurie Romig of Performance Resources, Inc., in Austin, Texas, for their knowledge and practical insight about groups and teams. Their management-consultant experience helped anchor our research conclusions with practical applications, especially in our discussions of problem solving, teamwork, meetings, and conflict.

At the University of Miami, assistant to the vice provost Nely Li has provided her usual high level of administrative support. Our colleague Valerie Manno Giroux and her students gave us many suggestions and helpful criticism of the fourth edition. Law student Diamela del Castillo offered encouragement, feedback, and her prodigious library research talents. One of us could not have made it through this revision without her. Thank you, Dee.

Finally, as in our previous editions, we offer our appreciation and thanks to our families—our most important small groups—who continue to teach us about teamwork and collaboration. John and Noah Masterson have grown up, graduated from college, and moved out into the world. Nancy Masterson, after three decades with her husband, continues as his greatest love, his best friend, and most respected critic.

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Mark and Matt Beebe were infants when the first edition was written. They are now growing into mature individuals who continue to teach their father about communication. Susan Beebe has been an integral part of the editorial and author team in this and every previous edition. She is again acknowledged for her considerable gift of working with words and her encouragement, support, and love of her spouse who works with words.

Steven A. Beebe John T. Masterson

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CHIAPTER ONE

An Introduction to Small Group Communication

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define communication.
- Define small group communication.
- Explain the importance of studying small group communication.
- List and describe the advantages and disadvantages of working with others in small groups.

- Compare and contrast primary and secondary groups.
- Describe differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.
- Identify the three elements of becoming a competent small group communicator.

sing a variety of research methods, communication scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have reached a similar conclusion about humankind: We are social creatures. We need to establish meaningful relationships with others. We need to associate with others in groups. We are reared in family groups. We are educated in groups. We worship in groups. We are entertained in groups. We work in groups. When an important problem arises, we seek others' advice and meet with problem-solving and decision-making groups in order to help find answers to important issues.

This book is about groups. More specifically, it is about communication in small groups.

"Why study small group communication?" You have probably already asked yourself that question. Or maybe you have asked, "What can a systematic study of small group communication do for me? How will it help me with my career? Will it really help me be a better committee member? Will studying small group communication improve my interpersonal relationships with my family and my friends?"

Studying small group communication may help you in many ways, but the main purpose of this book is to help you become a better communicator in the context of a small group. The book will strive to give you both a broad understanding of group communication processes and practical advice to help you become a more effective small group participant. Note that the book will primarily deal with **task-oriented small groups**—groups with a specific objective to achieve, information to share, a problem to solve, or a decision to make.

To frame our study of small group communication, we will examine two fundamental concepts. We will first explain assumptions about human communication and then zero in on a definition of small group communication.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

This book will focus on communication that occurs in a group. One scholar, discussing the importance of communication to an organization, describes it as:

```
the lifeblood . . .

the glue that binds . . .

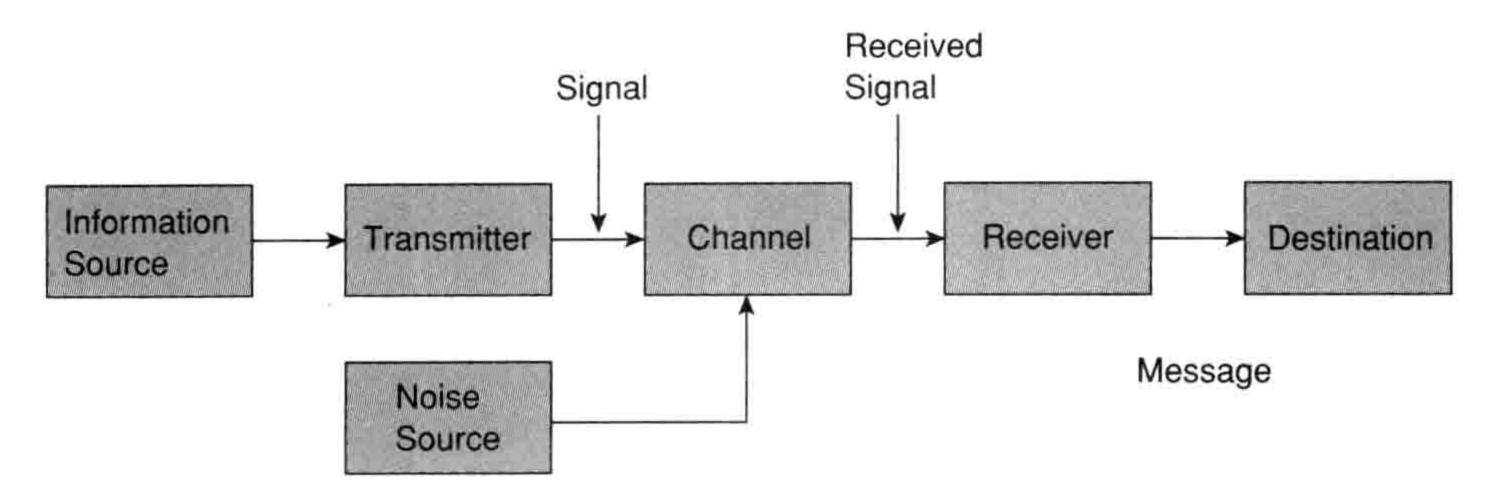
the oil that smooths . . .

the thread that ties . . .

the force that pervades . . .

the binding agent that cements all relationships. 1
```

FIGURE 1.1 THE SHANNON-WEAVER MODEL



The Shannon-Weaver model. (From *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver. University of Illinois Press, 1949. Reprinted by permission.)

These metaphors apply to small groups as well as to large corporations. Regardless of a group's size, its members must be able to talk, listen, and respond to one another. They must be able to communicate effectively and appropriately to achieve their goals.

What is this powerful, pervasive process called communication? Reduced to its essence, **communication** is the process of acting on information.² Someone does or says something, and there is a response in action, word, or thought. Throughout the past five decades, our understanding of the nature of communication has evolved from viewing it as a simple action-and-reaction exchange to a more complex, simultaneous, transactive process. Next we will examine the evolving meaning of the term *communication*.³

COMMUNICATION AS ACTION: TRANSFER OF INFORMATION

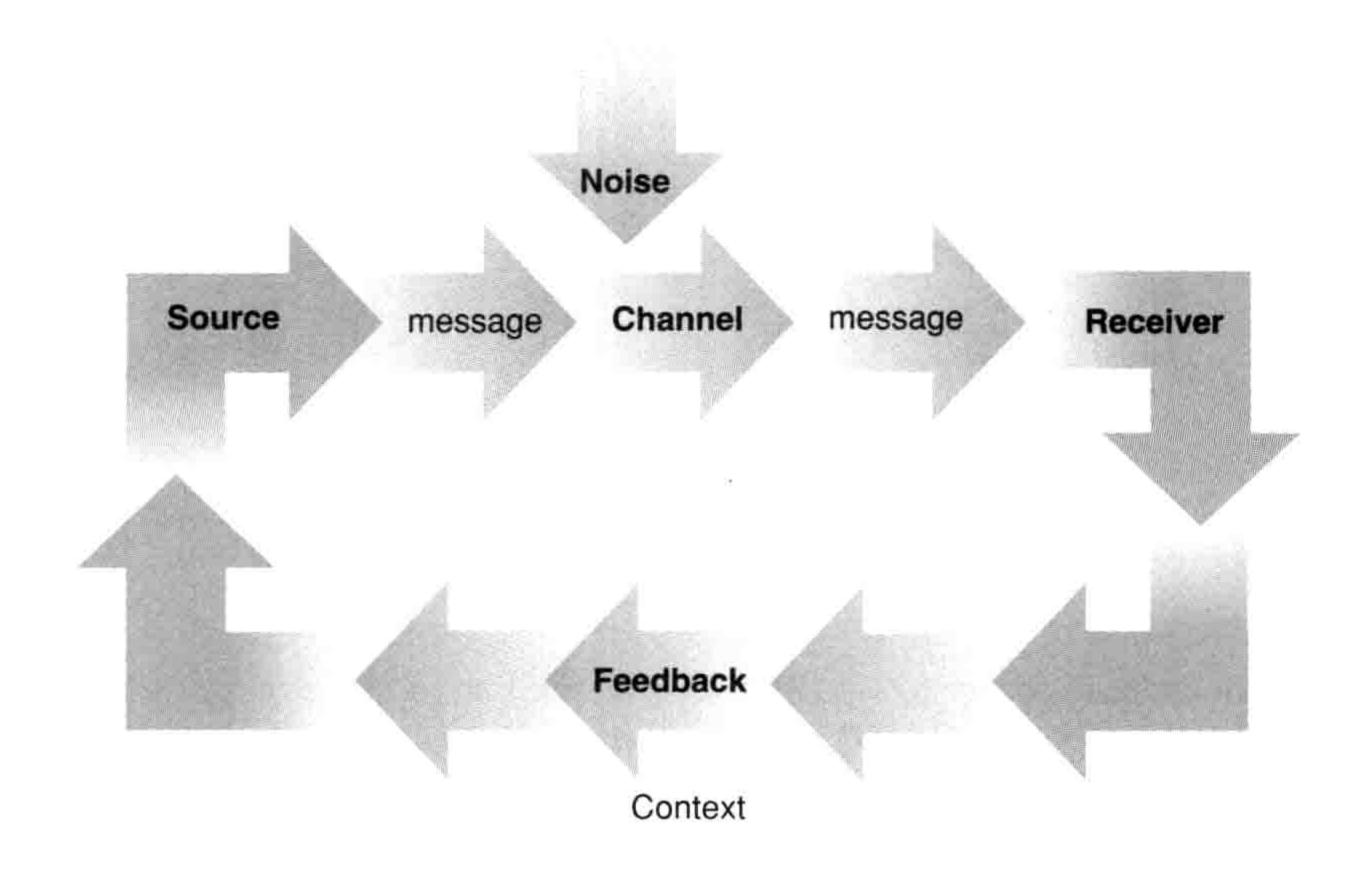
"But I told you what I wanted!" Such expressions of exasperation assume that if you send a message someone will receive it. An early conception viewed the communication process as:

who (sender)
says what (message)
in what channel (medium)
to whom (receiver)
with what effect.4

While this notion is clear and straightforward, it has a fundamental flaw: Communication is rarely, if ever, as simple as "what we put in is what we get out." Figure 1.1 shows an early model of communication which represents it as a linear, input-output process.

While this model depicts most critical elements of the process, it may nonetheless perpetuate the myth that information is communication. It is a

FIGURE 1.2 FEEDBACK



misconception to believe that communication has occurred simply because someone has said something to someone else. A response, or feedback to the message, is an essential aspect of the communication process.

COMMUNICATION AS INTERACTION: EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION

Feedback is the response to a message. When you communicate, someone may respond, perhaps with a frown or a smile, or maybe by saying something about your message. Feedback can be intentional (when you congratulate your child on successfully learning to ride a bicycle) or unintentional (when you yawn at a boring story). Your response can be verbal ("I really like your idea") or nonverbal (you frown when someone disagrees with your point.) Figure 1.2 depicts communication as an interactive process, or action and reaction. Feedback, or a response, is now included in the process.

But just because feedback is included in the model does not mean that the communication is effective. **Noise**, either in the channel or in the mind of the receiver, may contribute to an inaccurate understanding of the message intended. To be truly effective, communication should achieve three goals. First, the message should be understood; the receiver should comprehend it as encoded. Second, the communication should achieve the intended effect. If the receiver understands the message but does not take the requested action, the communication is still less than effective. Third, communication must be ethical.⁵ The communicator should not coerce the listener to respond to a message. Nor should he or she lie or knowingly use false information to achieve an intended effect.