Elam NUNNALLY
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# COMMUNICATION BASICS FOR HUMAN SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

A SAGE HUMAN SERVICES GUIDE 56

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# FOREWORD

For the authors this book is a continuation of a journey dedicated to understanding the intricacies of human communication. The depth of knowledge provided within these pages comes only after long and considered examination of human communication processes. To communicate about communication is indeed a difficult task; so it is noteworthy that the material in this book is both relevant and readable.

Progress in the development of communications theory has been a driving force in the advances made in the theory and practice of marital and family therapy and other human service professions. Human communication is so rich and so complicated it is possible to consciously understand only a part of it. Yet there are underlying processes which can be identified. The goal of this book is to enable human service practitioners to better understand and more effectively use these communication processes within the context of their practice.

A well-established guiding premise for understanding human communication is: One cannot *not* communicate. Thus a study of communications must include all the processes by which people influence one another. The Awareness Wheel presented in the first chapter provides the organizational framework from which to examine and specify some of the common but crucial elements of human communications. The ensuing discussions of the underlying processes of communication raise by implication a second guiding premise for understanding human relationships: Humans cannot *not* process communication. While the human mind may filter out of conscious awareness certain information or experiences, total indifference to communication is impossible. The very act of filtering out information engages the human in the

totality of the communications experience. The chapters dealing with expanding the overall awareness of all participants in a communications interchange demonstrates the choices available for use by all human beings.

Clearly, this book shows that ideas about communications can be systematized. By knowing what we as practitioners are doing we have a way to organize our language interactions. To put it another way, we have a way to know what we know about communicating. What and how we communicate is vital to our work. For one thing, the nature of the relationships formed with our clients, patients, or students will depend upon the way we, as practitioners, communicate. To simultaneously establish rapport with individuals and their social systems is no easy task. Yet we must use our communications skills to establish these multi-level relationships. In that sense practitioners are required to learn to recognize and to work with the complex nature of human communication at different systemic levels.

The ideas presented within these pages go beyond the elementary ideas of effectively talking and listening. With the knowledge and understanding provided in this book you will be able to consciously put into practice new skills and techniques helpful to both you and those you serve. The overall goal is communication that brings a sense of congruence among what is thought, felt, seen, heard, and done and what one wants and what is possible. While we as humans may have no choice about participating in the human communications process, we do have choices about the way we do it. By increasing our knowledge of human communication this text makes a substantial contribution to the entire field of human relationships.

—Donald R. Bardill
Florida State University

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And most important, to our students whose needs and challenges inspired us to write this book.

# INTRODUCTION

This book teaches basic communication skills which can help you become more effective in your professional practice. It is intended for practitioners and for students preparing for human service professions, e.g., counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, physicians, ministers, and family therapists.

We have drawn extensively from the ideas and skills found in the Couple Communication Program developed at the University of Minnesota by Miller, Nunnally, and Wackman (1975; 1979; 1988). These skills have been used and tested by human service professionals for two decades, not only in family life education programs, but also in professional practice in clinics, schools, social service agencies, churches, and businesses. The findings of numerous research studies support our view that these skills can work for you (Wampler, 1982).

We have also drawn from the skills and ideas about interaction and interpersonal helping developed at the Brief Family Therapy Center in Milwaukee (de Shazer, 1982, 1985; Nunnally, 1986). This group of researcher-practitioners focuses its investigations and helping efforts on what people do that works. Throughout this book we have maintained a similar focus—on what professionals do that works—in our suggestions about how to listen, disclose, ask questions, advise, reassure, and so on. We know from our years of experience in family practice and professional education that this is what is needed by practitioners and students preparing for human service professions.

We have also drawn on one author's long-standing interest in nonverbal communication and her investigations of how nonverbal communication is

used effectively in practice (Moy, 1981). In books on professional practice, treatment of this topic has too often been omitted or dealt with superficially.

To avoid the tedious use of "he and she," "his or her," etc., we have followed the convention of using she and her in some chapters and he, him, and his in the others. Our intent is to keep the material as simple and readable as possible.

By plan, this book is short. Of course, it cannot cover everything you have ever wanted to know about communication basics nor everything we would like to have written. With this feature of the book in mind, we have been generous in citing the sources of our ideas in order to provide the reader with direction for further study.

In the first six chapters we present basic communication skills: awareness, listening, disclosing, following and focusing, asking questions, nonverbal skills, styles of communication, and conflict resolution. A major organizing framework, the Awareness Wheel, is presented in Chapter 1.

Chapters 7 and 8 apply these skills and some additional ones to common helping processes: reassuring, advising, informing, directing, ordering, closing, confronting, complimenting, and giving neutral feedback. Chapter 9 applies these skills to work with special populations—the elderly, children, and teens—and highlights issues of ethnicity and gender. Chapter 10 shows how these skills can work for you in addressing sensitive issues such as sex, money, and death.

*CHAPTER 1*

# *THE AWARENESS WHEEL*

Communication goes on within a context of awareness. You can tell someone directly and intentionally what you are thinking only when you are *aware* of what you are thinking. The same is true for telling someone directly what you are feeling or wanting. You may give other people clues about your feelings, thoughts, etc., by how you behave—even if you are not yourself fully aware of what you are doing—but they cannot be sure of your meaning unless you tell them directly and clearly, and you cannot do that if you do not know yourself. Clear, explicit communication depends on self-awareness. The Awareness Wheel provides a tool for tuning in to yourself and becoming more self-aware (see Figure 1.1). It also provides a tool for listening attentively to your clients or patients and sorting out what they are telling you.

The Awareness Wheel (Miller et al., 1988) consists of five parts: sensing, thinking, feeling, wanting, and doing. These are the five parts of your awareness. Let's consider each part in turn:

*Sensing*. Your senses are the funnel through which all information comes to you: touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste. For example, you may feel cold (or warm), and you notice that the thermostat is set at 70 degrees.

*Thinking*. You think to yourself that the furnace must be off; otherwise you wouldn't feel cold. This is an example of interpreting or making meaning of the data taken in through your senses. Your thoughts or interpretations are the meanings you make of data to help you understand yourself, others, and situations. Different types of interpretations include impressions, beliefs, opinions, expectations, and evaluations.

*Feeling*. Feelings are the spontaneous, emotional responses that you have in a situation. For example, you may fear that the furnace is broken. This

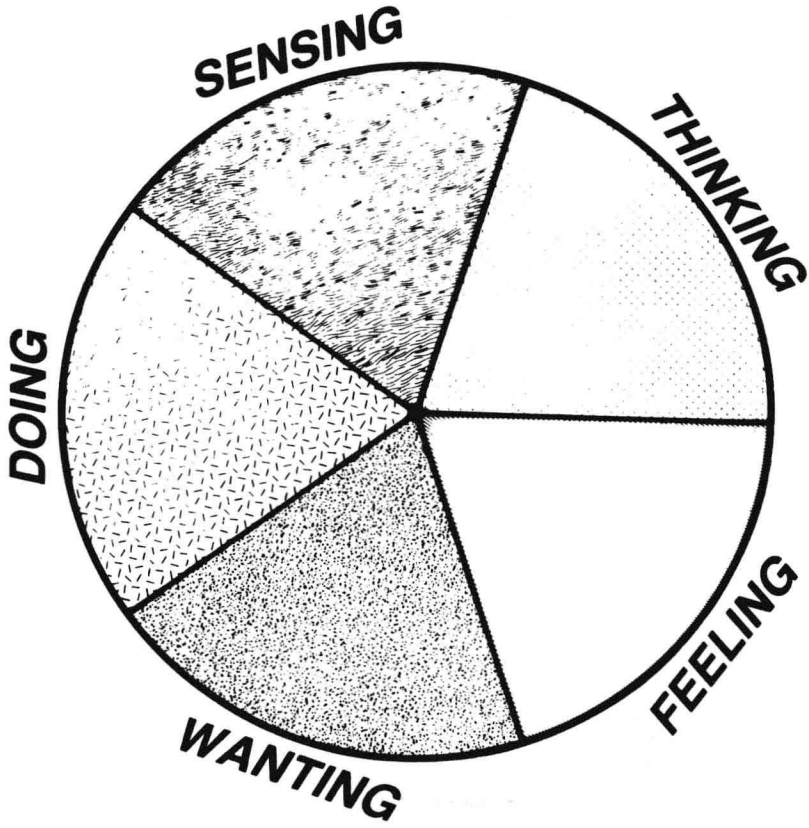


**Figure 1.1 Awareness Wheel**
SOURCE: Sherod Miller, Daniel Wackman, Elam Nunnally, and Phyllis Miller. *Connecting with Self and Others*. Littleton, Co.: Interpersonal Communicating Programs, Inc. 1988.

follows from noticing that you are cold, that the thermostat is set at 70 (sensing), and that you think the furnace must be off. Here is a partial list of adjectives used to give names to feelings: pleased, mad, excited, elated, fearful, eager, happy, sad, surprised, amused.

*Wanting*. You are attracted to certain things, people, ideas, and situations, and you are not attracted to, or may even be repulsed by, others. These are your wants (and your "not wants"). You want more heat in the house when you are feeling cold, and you don't want to have to buy a new furnace.

Common wants include wanting to have friends, to get one's way, to have fun, to stay healthy, to be friendly, to understand, to love, and to be loved.

You may want something for yourself, for another or others, or for yourself *and* another, e.g.:

"I want to be successful."

"I want you to be successful."

"I want our relationship to work."

*Doing*. The action part of your Awareness Wheel includes what you are doing now, what you did, or what you will do later. You may, for instance, be aware that you checked the thermostat earlier and are changing the setting to 75 (present). You will check the furnace later to see if it is heating (future). Usually actions are immediately preceded by wants of one sort or another, such as wanting to feel warmer or more comfortable, or wanting to find out if the furnace is working.

## CONNECTING THE PARTS

We show these five kinds of awareness as a wheel to reveal the connectedness of the parts and their interdependence. Thus, at any one point in time your awareness may be in any one part of the wheel and move from there to any other part. Awareness does not always proceed clockwise, or counterclockwise, around the Wheel. Notice in the following example that awareness focuses on sensing, moves to thinking, then to wanting, then to feeling, then to doing, then to feeling again, and back to doing.

The speedometer reads 75. I'd better slow down or I'll get a ticket. I don't want to get a ticket; haven't gotten one in eight years. I sure felt embarrassed last time. I'm slowing down.

At another time, in similar circumstances, awareness may move differently around the Wheel, from sensing to feeling, to doing, to wanting:

The speedometer reads 75. That's just what was written on that speeding ticket eight years ago. I can still feel the embarrassment. I'm going to slow down. I don't want another one.

In the Wheel, each section touches all other sections, and you can move directly from one section to any other section. There is no prescribed sequence. Nor is one part of the Wheel more essential than another: All parts are needed.

Figure 1.2 shows another way to think about the five kinds of awareness. Each is associated with a different part of the human body.

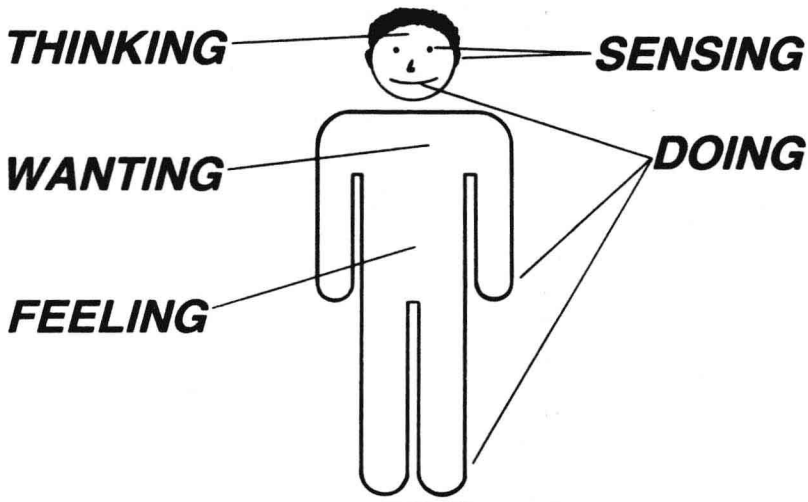


**Figure 1.2 Awareness**

## PATTERNS OF AWARENESS

Certain occupations emphasize one dimension of awareness over the others; for example, training in art or photography and in the natural sciences emphasizes the sensing dimension. Sales and advertising emphasize doing (i.e., image projection and "stage presence"). Military training emphasizes sensing and doing, i.e., learning prescribed responses to commands and to enemy moves. Legal training emphasizes thinking and doing. An occupation which emphasizes one part of awareness may also discourage another part of

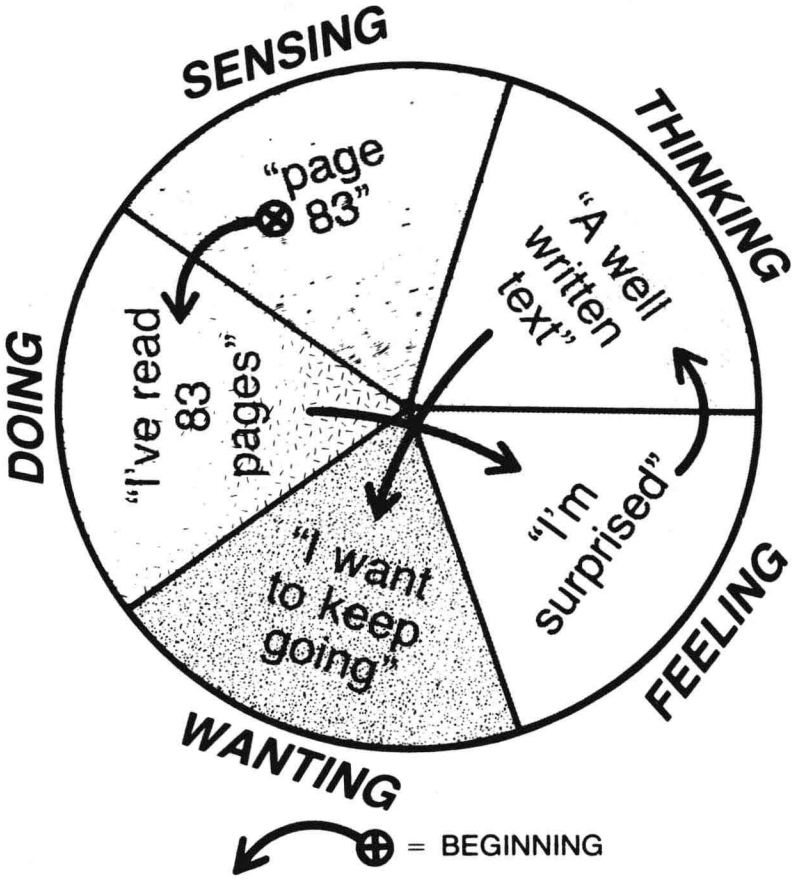


**Figure 1.3 Complete Awareness**

awareness; for example, scientific, legal, and military training each downplay attention to feelings.

Long before entering an occupation, while growing up in a family, each person has years of learning that encourage paying attention to certain parts of awareness and to disregarding others. Some families encourage only certain parts of awareness, e.g., a stoical family will encourage awareness of sensing and doing, and discourage awareness of feeling and wanting. Many American families discourage female children from paying attention to their own wants and discourage male children from paying attention to their own feelings. Some families emphasize and encourage all parts of awareness. Each person

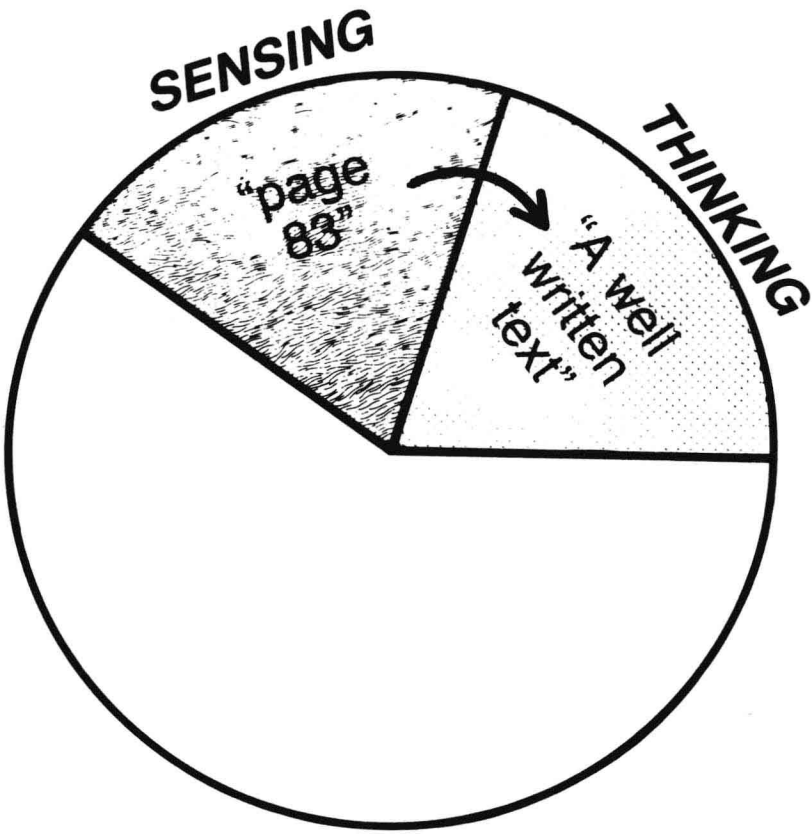


**Figure 1.4 Limited Awareness**

brings to his or her chosen occupation a particular pattern of favored and unfavored awarenesses, and these patterns will be strengthened or modified by the necessities of the particular occupation. Fortunately, patterns of awareness can be changed, and you can increase your awareness in any part of the Awareness Wheel.

Having "high awareness" doesn't mean being aware of all parts of the Wheel at all times. It does mean being able to bring each or any part of awareness into focus when you choose to, when it matters. Figure 1.3 gives an example of an "everyday" complete awareness relating to a rather ordinary situation.