CHAPTER 1

Organizational Communication
A Competency-Based Approach

DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES THROUGH...

**KNOWLEDGE**
- Describing communication in the information-rich world
- Defining and describing communication competency
- Defining and describing the human communication process
- Identifying descriptions of organizations
- Surveying definitions of organizational communication

**SENSITIVITY**
- Understanding communication as a key to organizational excellence
- Developing awareness of our personal communication competencies
- Understanding human communication as attempting to create shared realities, shared meanings
- Distinguishing among interpersonal, small-group, and organizational communication

**SKILLS**
- Assessing personal development needs
- Practicing analysis capabilities

**VALUES**
- Understanding communication competency as a personal and organizational need
- Clarifying a contemporary “good communicator” theme
- Understanding communication as fundamental to the process of organizing
- Evaluating communication for ethics and effectiveness
The Changing Nature of Organizations and Work

We are in one of the more turbulent periods in history. This statement is not profound but is real nevertheless. Our twenty-first-century world is more complex, and the knowledge we bring to bear on our problems often adds to confusion and disagreement. We have unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented problems. Most of us seek a firm direction that is outmoded. Uncertainty and change have become the norm. We need new thinking, new criticisms, new knowledge, new approaches, and new understandings. Creativity and innovation are more important than ever.

Nowhere is the current turbulence more evident than in contemporary organizations. Increased economic pressures, globalization, rapidly diversifying employee and customer bases, changing technology, societal needs, an increasing awareness of organizational relationships to society in general, and a host of other factors contribute to new organization types, new relationships between organizations and employees, and a growing acknowledgment of the complexity of all organizational life. The virtual organization, e-commerce, high-performing teams, contract employment, increased contact with a culturally diverse world, and home-based work are but a few of the changes with impacts on interpersonal relationships, group interactions, management and leadership, personal and professional ethics, time management, and nonwork life.

What many have called the old social contract—mutual loyalty and support between employees and their employers—has been replaced by frequent shifts from one employer to another, increased global competition, downsizing in workforces, part-time employment, flatter organizations, and a generally changing relationship between management and workers. Critics of the changing nature of our work lives call for increased workplace democracy, whereas its advocates defend the changes as necessary for survival.

Challenges for Individuals and Organizations

The environments individuals and organizations encounter are complex, fragile, turbulent, and uncertain. The opportunities for innovation and change are enormous. J. F. Rischard (2002) describes the challenges individuals and organizations face as problems of sharing our planet, our humanity, and a global rule book. Rischard identifies global warming, biodiversity, deforestation, poverty, education, the digital divide, e-commerce rules, international labor and migration rules, the global financial architecture, and several other problems as issues so pressing they must be addressed in the next twenty years by individuals and organizations including for-profit, not-for-profit, governmental, and educational institutions. War, terrorism, global warming, and accelerating rates of change add to what appears to be a growing list. Individuals and organizations experience increasingly diverse environments characterized by age, gender, race, social class, and cultural differences. For individuals the requirement to continually learn and build new competencies has never been greater. Individuals continually face challenges between complex organization requirements and personal and family life. Individuals and organizations are asked to engage these challenges and differences to create opportunities, generate innovation, and contribute to productive change.
The Communications Era

Regardless of the position taken about the changing nature of organizations and work, few disagree the communications era surrounds us. We live, work, and play in complex communications environments. Sophisticated communications technologies have changed the way we do everything. The rapid development and use of communications technologies have contributed to individuals, organizations, and the entire world becoming more interconnected than at any previous point in human history.

All of us are experiencing a unique time in history with two unprecedented shifts—globalization and the nature of innovation—driving changes impacting all aspects of our lives. Innovation can occur anywhere, and participation in the creation of new products and processes is no longer limited to superpowers and highly developed countries. The United States of America, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom have all seen white-collar jobs move to countries such as India, China, and Russia. Millions of routine jobs have disappeared, while new and more stimulating jobs requiring communications expertise are created. With more than half of America’s workforce and gross national product in knowledge industries, virtually all agree we are in a postindustrial information society moving to a conceptual age. Daniel Pink (2005), who describes the shift from the information to the conceptual age, suggests, “The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society’s richest rewards and share its greatest joys” (p. 1). Thomas Friedman (2006) believes “we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which—if politics and terrorism do not get in the way—could usher in an amazing era of prosperity, innovation, and collaboration, by companies, communities, and individuals” (p. 8).

As an individual you are likely to spend most of your working life employed in a “knowledge/information” or “conceptual” job. You are more likely to create, process, or distribute information than you are to be directly involved in the production of goods. There is a greater need for salespeople, teachers, lawyers, financial analysts, media producers, bankers, consultants, scientists, engineers, doctors, architects, writers, information managers, editors, and social workers and a decreased need for manufacturing assembly workers, service support workers, miners, toolmakers, machinists, builders, and welders.

One of the most important characteristics of the “communications” era is the rapid change associated with mass production of information, change requiring us all to be constantly involved in the learning of new activities and processes. Most of us have already experienced rapid change brought about by new technologies. For example, although checks can still be written by hand, many of us pay our bills online or with plastic cards and use computer terminals to deposit money in or withdraw money from our bank accounts. We can still go to the movies, or we can bring
movies to our homes through discs, satellites, and Internet connections. We can write letters and memos to send through “regular” mail, or we can use sophisticated electronic systems to send and receive all types of correspondence and files rapidly. We use our cellular phones for talking with others but also as our Web connections, cameras (both still and video), instant messaging devices, calculators, clocks, e-mail processors, televisions, and a host of other functions. Social networking of all types increasingly is prevalent in both our personal and organizational environments.

Fiber-optic connections, wireless networks, and global telecommunications and computer networks have literally changed the ways in which we do research, changed those with whom we can stay in constant contact, and altered notions of time and space. We are connected daily with both close friends and strangers. Most students reading this book are in traditional classrooms with “live” instructors. For some students now, and for more in the future, however, “live” means that the instructor is located at a remote site equipped with audio, video, and computer interconnects supported by e-books. Convergence is the term of the day, with computing, wireless technologies, and more traditional media such as television converging into integrated tools for work, school, family, and leisure environments.

We have so much information that, for individuals and organizations, the challenge is how to deal with our information alternatives. This daily increase in information (based on innovations in communications and computer technology) brings with it rapid change in activities, processes, and products.

Workers in the communications era of microelectronics, computers, and telecommunications have an abundance of information for decision making and a growing concern for information overload. Research suggests virtually all knowledge workers use e-mail and voicemail, with use of mobile phones, conference calls, corporate intranets, IM/text messaging, corporate Web sites, information portals, and corporate extranets commonplace. Social media have become a cultural phenomenon in all aspects of our lives. We are connected around the clock as work and personal time merge for many. We can routinely communicate across both geography and organizational levels. It is not unusual, for example, for employees of an organization in Boston to interact with their counterparts in Los Angeles, whom they have never met, while both groups prepare a portion of a single report or recommendation. And for a growing number of individuals, this report can be generated without ever leaving their homes as they “telecommute” from automated home workstations to offices around the globe.

The complexity of all organizational life and the rapid increase in communications technologies place increasing demands on our individual communication abilities. These demands are best met with the perspective that becoming and staying competent is an ongoing process requiring lifelong learning.

**Communication: The Key to Organizational Excellence**

**Organizational excellence** Ability of people to work together and utilize technology for the creative solving of increasingly complex problems.

In this complex and information-rich conceptual society, the key to organizational excellence is communication excellence. Communication systems within organizations—both human
and technological—are responsible for solving increasingly complex problems creatively. People using the machines of the communications era must coordinate large volumes of information for the performance of new and dynamic tasks. There is widespread recognition, however, that excellence in organizational problem solving is more than the efficient management of large volumes of facts. Organizational excellence stems from the dedicated commitment of people, people who are motivated to work together and who share similar values and visions about the results of their efforts.

Viewing communications as the key to organizational excellence is not new. As early as 1938, Chester Barnard, in his now-famous work *The Functions of the Executive*, described as a primary responsibility of executives the development and maintenance of a system of communication. Research since then has linked organizational communication to managerial effectiveness, the integration of work units across organizational levels, characteristics of effective supervision, job and communication satisfaction, innovation, adaptability, creativity, and overall organizational effectiveness and performance. In fact, numerous scholars have gone as far as to suggest that organizations are essentially complex communication processes that create and change events. For both the industrial society of the past and the information and conceptual societies of today and tomorrow, there is broad agreement about the centrality of organizational communication and that organizational communication plays a significant part in contributing to or detracting from organizational excellence.

With this emphasis on the complex, fast-paced information conceptual society and the importance of human communication, questions arise concerning what skills and abilities organizations need from their future employees. How should individuals prepare themselves for the information responsibilities and opportunities that almost inevitably will be a part of the future? What does it take to contribute to organizational communication excellence?

Put simply, organizations of today and tomorrow need competent communicators at all organizational levels. With more complex decisions, rapid change, more information, and less certainty about what the decisions should be, excellence in a conceptual world depends on the abilities, commitment, and creativity of all organizational members. As a result, students, communication teachers and researchers, and active organizational members must work together to understand what contributes to organizational communication competency and how best to develop personal potential. It is our collective expertise which will detract from or contribute to excellence.

**Excellence In Communication: Communication Competency**

Quintilian, an early Latin rhetorician, is credited with introducing the ideal of the “good man speaking well,” an ideal that is not as far removed from contemporary concepts of organizational communication competency as history might suggest. In fact, Michael Hackman and Craig Johnson (2004) identified a contemporary “good communicator” theme when reviewing research from personnel administrators throughout the United States of America. Today’s organizations need people
Communication competency
Composed of knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values. Competence arises from interaction of theory, practice, and analysis.

who can speak well, listen, write, persuade others, demonstrate interpersonal skills, gather information, and exhibit small-group problem-solving expertise. In other words, organizations in our complex and turbulent world need flexible and creative people who have diverse and well-developed communication abilities. Yet how do we determine if we are competent organizational communicators? Who decides? On what do we base our conclusions?

Researchers differ in how they define communication competency. Some believe that a person is competent if he or she knows what is appropriate in a specific situation, whether or not that behavior actually occurs. A student, for example, who realizes that class participation is required for a high grade may choose not to participate, yet the student can be considered competent because of the knowledge or awareness of the appropriate behavior. Other researchers extend the competency concept beyond knowledge of appropriate behaviors to include actual language performance and the achievement of interpersonal goals. The student, from this perspective, must not only recognize appropriate participation behaviors but also participate so as to demonstrate communication competency.

Fred Jablin and Patricia Sias (2001), in their comprehensive discussion of communication competency, suggested that the concept of communication competency is best understood by an ecological model that revolves around four systems:

1. the microsystem, which contains the developing organizational member and other persons in the immediate work environment (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, and clients);
2. the mesosystem, which represents the interrelations among various microsystems (e.g., what individuals learn in their project teams may affect their competence in the functional work groups in which they are members);
3. the macrosystem, which does not represent the immediate context in which an individual works, but does impinge on him or her (i.e., major divisions of the organization and the organization itself as a whole); and
4. the exosystem, which represents the overarching cultural belief system, forms of knowledge, social, technological, and political ideologies.... In brief, an ecological perspective emphasizes system embeddedness. That is, the actions of one element of the system affect the other elements. (pp. 836–837)

Jablin and Sias specifically described how globalization and technology have changed forever notions of what is a competent communicator. It is fair to conclude they expand previous notions of communication competency to extend to groups and to the organization as a whole within its broad environment. Sherry Morreale (2009) suggests linkage between communication competence and ethics. Specifically, Morreale identifies issues of competence related to pursuing self-interest versus the interest of others, to engaging in information sharing versus manipulation, and to recognizing the long-term effects of communication across time and diverse relationships.

Stephen Littlejohn and David Jabusch (1982) have proposed a particularly useful definition of communication competency for the organizational setting. They suggest that communication competency is “the ability and willingness of an individual to participate responsibly in a transaction in such a way as to maximize the outcomes of shared meanings.” This definition requires not only knowledge of appropriate behaviors but also motivation to engage in communication that results
in mutual understanding. In other words, communication competency involves our personal willingness and ability to communicate so that our meanings are understood and we understand the meanings of others. Finally, this definition can be applied to the group and macro-organizational levels so important in the ecological model proposed by Jablin and Sias. Regardless of differences in perspectives, organizational communication competency relates to message encoding and decoding abilities, the process of communication initiation and consumption.

When we begin to think about our personal communication competency, we quickly realize that we form impressions of our own competency while making evaluations about the competency of others. We try to decide what is appropriate for us as well as for others, and we determine whether that behavior is effective in a particular circumstance. In other words, my impression of my own competency and the competency of others is related to my evaluation of whether we exhibited the “right” behaviors and achieved “desirable” results in a particular situation. Determining what is “right” and “desirable” is not always easy, however. Think for a moment about your personal experiences. Have you ever been in a situation where others thought you did a good job although you were disappointed in yourself? Who was right? Were you competent or incompetent? Can both be correct?

Earlier we said that organizational excellence depends on the communication competencies of all organizational members. Specifically, we described the need for creative problem solving among diverse groups of people who often share little common information. With this emphasis on communication and technology, the real question becomes what individuals should do to prepare themselves to meet their future communication needs. In other words, how do we develop and evaluate our communication competencies?

Our answer begins by returning to the Littlejohn and Jabusch approach to communication competency. Littlejohn and Jabusch (1982) contend competency arises out of four basic components: process understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, and ethical responsibility. Process understanding refers to the cognitive ability to understand the dynamics of the communication event. Interpersonal sensitivity is the ability to perceive feelings and meanings. Communication skills are the ability to develop and interpret message strategies in specific situations. The ethical component of competency is the attitudinal set that governs concern for the well-being of all participants in taking responsibility for communication outcomes. Finally, Littlejohn and Jabusch believe that competence comes from the interaction of three primary elements: theory, practice, and analysis. When applied to the organizational setting, the Littlejohn and Jabusch approach can be modified and expanded to include the competency components this book seeks to develop: knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values.

Organizational Communication: A Competency-Based Approach

This book is designed to help you develop communication competencies for effective organizational communication. The goal of the book is to provide theory, practice, and analysis opportunities that contribute to knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values important for organizational excellence.
Knowledge: the ability to understand the organizational communication environment. Knowledge competencies are what we come to know about a particular field. Knowledge is the learning of theory and principles. Knowledge competencies are fundamental to support our sensitivity to organizational life, to guide our skill development, and to assist us in understanding the application of ethical standards and our personal values in a variety of organizational settings. Knowledge competency develops through the exploration of the interactive process nature of human communication. We examine what organizational communication is and the major theoretical approaches for its study. We explore the roles of individuals in organizations and examine communication implications of major organizational theories. Finally, we discuss vital organizational subjects such as conflict, leadership, and strategic communication.

Sensitivity: the ability to sense accurately organizational meanings and feelings. It is related to our ability and willingness to understand what others feel and do. Sensitivity competency develops through the examination of our personal “theories-in-use” about communication and organizations. We assess individual preferences for leadership and conflict, as well as the impact of personal differences and similarities within organizational settings. We place emphasis on how we come to understand our complex organizational environments.

Skills: the ability to analyze organizational situations accurately and to initiate and consume organizational messages effectively. The skills competency focuses on developing important analytical capabilities as well as the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of settings. Skills competency develops through analysis and practice opportunities. Specifically, analytical skills develop by applying knowledge and sensitivity to case studies and individual experiences. We also present and practice problem-solving and conflict-management skills.

Values: the importance of taking personal responsibility for effective communication, thereby contributing to organizational excellence. Values competency develops through discussion of personal responsibility for participation in organizational communication. We examine ethical dilemmas relating to organizational communication and the importance of values to organizational culture. Finally, we use case studies to illustrate ethical and value issues common in organizations.

The “What Business Is This of Ours?” Case

The following case describes a problem at Quality Engineering, a medium-sized company located in Denver, Colorado. The case is based on a real situation at Quality, although the name of the supplier in question has been changed. You will
use this case to think about individuals communicating and to begin to understand the concept of organizational communication.

John and Mary were the only two buyers in the purchasing department of Quality Engineering. Both had been with the company for several years and were experienced in handling purchases for the manufacturing, research, finance, and marketing areas of Quality. Mary typically handled purchases for the manufacturing and research areas, and John was the principal buyer for the rest of the organization. At times their individual workloads required they cross departments and help each other. Their boss, Mike Anderson, the accountant for Quality, believed they were the best purchasing team with whom he had ever worked. He was proud of their efforts and willingness to cooperate with each other. He frequently commented to Quality management that John and Mary made money for the company by getting the best possible prices for goods and services.

Mike was surprised and concerned to overhear John and Mary in a heated discussion.

**JOHN:** I can’t believe you are still using Anderson Printing as one of our suppliers. I told you last month that their last two orders for my groups were late and part of the printing had to be sent back because of errors. I told them then that I wouldn’t accept any more of their bids on our jobs. It makes me look like a fool when I hear from them that you are still ordering their products for manufacturing and research. How can we enforce good quality from our suppliers if we don’t present a united front?

**MARY:** Just a minute. Anderson Printing has been one of our good suppliers for over ten years. I know we have had some problems with them in the past year but I don’t think we should drop them flat. They have pulled us out of a lot of jams when we needed printing in a big hurry. I never agreed to drop them from our supplier list. You just told them they were gone and expected me to support your decision. You should have talked to me about it first. I don’t care if you think you looked like a fool. We are in this together and need to make those types of decisions as a team.

**JOHN:** I’ll admit we should have talked about it, but Anderson made me so mad on that last deal that I just told them they were through. I expected you to support me. We both want what is best for Quality. Our reputations are good because we always get the company the best products for the lowest price. I would have supported you.

**MARY:** Yes, I suspect you would have, but John, you can’t lose your temper like that. We need to work together on these decisions. You and I can usually work out a solution when we try hard enough. I don’t want to drop any supplier on the spur of the moment, especially when we may have trouble replacing them. John, sometimes I think we have worked together for so long that we take each other for granted. We are friends and I want it to remain that way, but that shouldn’t stop us from doing business with each other as true professionals.

**JOHN:** Wait a minute. Are you saying that I don’t act like a professional—?

**MARY:** No, see what I mean? You get mad when I even suggest we might improve the way we do things.
Chapter 1 ▶ Organizational Communication

Understanding Human Communication

Are John and Mary engaged in interpersonal or organizational communication, or both? Does the setting make the difference? Can we distinguish between interpersonal and organizational communication? When we talk about developing our personal communication competencies, is it different for our personal and organizational lives? The answers to these questions lie in understanding human communication and how organizations and human communication relate. In other words, frameworks for understanding organizational communication can be found in descriptions of human communication and organizations.

Although the discussion between John and Mary is typical of human communication exchanges that occur daily in organizations, it also is typical of communication between two people regardless of the setting. In fact, the discussion between John and Mary illustrates some of the important basics necessary for understanding human communication.

Defining Communication

Analyzing the exchange between John and Mary will help us describe human communication. John and Mary transfer information, they elicit responses from each other, and they engage in social interaction. They are literally constituting (or bringing about) their experience of working together and making sense of what it means. Further, it is possible to say that they use symbols (words) to attempt to create shared meaning (mutual understanding). Their disagreement about how to handle problems with Anderson Printing will influence not only what happens to Anderson as a supplier to Quality Engineering but their interpersonal relationship as well. Put another way, their exchange is an example of communication behaviors creating and shaping both relationships and events through a culturally dependent process of assigning meaning to symbols.

John wants Mary to share his reality that Anderson has made serious mistakes that disqualify it from providing goods and services to Quality. Furthermore, he expects Mary to accept another reality: that friends and coworkers should support each other’s decisions, even if decisions are made on the spur of the moment and in anger. Mary has a different set of realities that she wants John to understand. Although she agrees about recent problems with Anderson, part of her reality includes Anderson’s past service to Quality and the possible difficulty of replacing its goods and services with another supplier. She also believes that John should have included her in his decision.

John: Well, I just think friends should support each other. I know I may not have handled the Anderson thing just right, but as my friend I expected more support from you.

Mary: Oh, John, there you go again!
We do not know from this exchange how open or direct John and Mary intend to be with each other. We do not have enough information to determine if other agendas influence their exchange. We do know John and Mary make conscious choices about the realities they exchange. When John and Mary exchange their individual realities, their communication is an attempt to construct shared realities.

Although they may not agree, their communication enables each to share the realities of the other and literally create their present reality.

**Human Communication: Messages and Constitutive Processes**

When John and Mary construct their shared realities, they engage in what we call the **human communication process**. Both John and Mary serve as **sources** and **receivers** of messages. Both engage in message **encoding** and **decoding** and in selecting verbal and nonverbal **channels** for message transmission. Both are influenced by their individual **competence** and their perception of the competence of the other. Each brings to the exchange a different set of **experiences**, and each may view the context of their interaction differently. Thus, all their messages are subject to distortion or noise. The **effect**, or what happens between John and Mary, is a result of the complex interaction of all these elements. John and Mary are literally constituting or bringing about the reality of their relationship.

**Source/Receiver**

Each individual engaged in communication with others is both a message **source** and a message **receiver**. We talk (send messages) while closely monitoring the nonverbal reactions of others (receiving messages). We listen (receive messages) and determine how to respond (send messages). We use technology to rapidly exchange messages without cues important in face-to-face interactions. Often message-sending and message-receiving activities occur so rapidly that they seem to be happening simultaneously.

**Encoding/Decoding**

As a message source and receiver, each individual encodes and decodes messages. Message **encoding** is the process of formulating messages, choosing content and symbols to convey meaning. Message encoding is determining what we want to be understood (content) and how we believe that it can best be presented (choosing symbols). Message **decoding** is the process of assigning meaning in the role of receiver to message symbols generated by the message source. Decoding is taking what we see and hear from others and deciding how it should be interpreted or
understood. Both encoding and decoding are influenced by our communicative competence (knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values), our personal identifications (cultural, social, organizational, and other), our specific intentions (desire for clarity, openness, manipulation, deceit, control, and so forth), our past experiences, our perception of the competence of others, and the communication context.

**Message**

The *message* is the symbolic attempt to transfer meaning; it is the signal that serves as a stimulus for a receiver. Sources send messages consisting of auditory, visual, olfactory, gustatory, or tactile stimuli in any combination of these five senses. Sources of messages intend meaning, but messages in and of themselves do not carry meaning. Meanings, or interpretations of messages, are assigned when the receiver decodes the message. Messages serve as symbols for meaning and as such are subject to situational and cultural influences. In other words, to understand a message as a source intends requires an understanding of the source's symbol system (language and actions and intent of language and actions) in a particular situation.

**Channel**

The *channel* is the medium through which the message is transmitted. It is the link or links between source and receiver. Channels include the five senses and any technological means used for message transmission. Channels are frequently used in combination (verbal and nonverbal, oral and written, face-to-face, and telemediated), with certain channels generally more credible than others. When verbal and nonverbal messages appear to contradict, for example, researchers tell us most people will find the nonverbal channel more credible than the verbal one. In other words, most of us believe it is more difficult to lie nonverbally than verbally. Channels can distort messages both technologically and in sensory reception. Indeed, the very selection of one channel over another may become a message in and of itself. Written channels, for example, are more often used than face-to-face channels for giving bad news. Evidence is growing suggesting e-mail and text messages are often more harsh than face-to-face communication. Receiving a memo or e-mail from your boss—the bad-news channel—may be cause for alarm even before the actual message has been read.

**Noise**

*Noise* is the distortion or interference that contributes to discrepancies between the meaning intended by the source of a message and the meaning assigned by the receiver.
and the type or types of noise contribute to the meanings assigned to messages by receivers and to the encoding of new messages. Think for a moment about your reaction to receiving an important message from a person whose credibility you have reason to doubt. What meaning do you assign to the message based on your prior relationship with this individual? Assume next that you receive the same message from a trusted friend. Is your reaction different? What type of noise was generated by your past experiences with both individuals? How did that noise affect meaning?

**Competence**

Each individual brings knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values to communication interactions. Our ability to understand appropriate behaviors, our specific intentions, our willingness to engage in communication, and our ability to interact with others to generate shared realities all contribute to our impression of our own *competence*. Also, we continually evaluate and form impressions about the competence of those with whom we communicate. Our impression of our own competence and the impression we have of the competence of others contribute to both the encoding and decoding of messages. Ultimately, competence contributes to communication effects and how we evaluate the effectiveness of our interactions.

**Field of Experience**

All parties in a communication interaction bring a specific set of experiences or background to bear on the interaction. What we do in a particular situation is related to how much we know about the situation from past experiences and whether we share any common past experiences. We may behave very differently in situations in which we have considerable past experience than we would in situations that are new and unfamiliar. The *field of experience* is situation specific and may or may not relate to broader evaluations of self-competence. In other words, although we may feel less competent in situations in which we have little past experience, that impression does not automatically transfer to other circumstances in which we have more background.

Generally, it is believed that the more common the field of experience among those communicating, the easier it is to share similar meanings or to construct shared realities. Have you ever tried, for example, to explain an American sporting event to a visitor from another country where the sport is not played and has never been televised? Did you even know where to begin? Chances are that the lack of any prior experience on the part of your receiver (no common field of experience between you) required you to engage in considerable detail, making it difficult even to begin to describe the event. You can imagine that your approach would be entirely different if you described the same event to a longtime fan of the sport.
Communication Context

The **communication context** is the environment for the communication interaction. Context includes not only the specific time and place of the interaction but also the roles, relationships, and status of communication participants. As such, prior interactions among participants contribute to the construction of the current communication context. It is fair to say context contributes to our specific intentions in a given circumstance. Communication intentions, as most of us have experienced, can range from full disclosure, openness, and clarity seeking to deception, ambiguity, manipulation, and control. Most of us recognize we communicate differently depending on how well we know people, what their formal position is in relation to us, and how visible our communication is to others. The way we express ourselves in the privacy of our own homes may differ from what we will say and do in our work environments. How we communicate in face-to-face interactions often varies from what we do with our mobile technology. Openly disagreeing with a friend or coworker is different from openly disagreeing with our boss. The way we express ourselves is related to whether we believe others to be more knowledgeable or competent than we are or whether we believe that we possess the best information in a specific setting. The way we express ourselves also reflects the expectations of the particular culture or environment in which we communicate. We can therefore say that context is both culturally and physically influenced, and as with other elements in the communication process, perception of context can differ from one communication participant to another.

**Realities and Effects**

The communication **realities or effects** are the result, consequence, or outcome of the communication exchange. Effects can be observed to be directly related to communication interactions. When people have an argument and terminate relationships at the end of the argument, we witness what we would call an obvious effect. At other times, the effect is not immediately observable or is, at best, delayed in time and context. A student does not contribute to a group project; the project is completed and all group members receive the same grade. Nothing appears to happen until the next class project begins and members of the group ask the instructor to reassign the student to another team. They share a reality from a previous set of communication exchanges which influences their desire of a different future. Although less direct, this reality or effect nevertheless should be understood as an outcome of previous communication exchanges.

In addition to being viewed in terms of results, the effect of an interaction is evaluated by communication participants for effectiveness and ethics. Did the outcomes result from the free, informed choices of all parties? Did one or more parties feel manipulated? Were all parties empathically supported? Were the best alternatives considered as a result of the interaction? It is in this evaluative area—ethics and effectiveness—that future interactions are influenced. Perceptions of whether past interactions were ethical and effective influence perceptions of the desirability of future communication.
Communication as Constitutive of Shared Realities

Human communication is the process of attempting to construct **shared realities**, to create shared meanings. It is our attempts to have others understand our world as we do or as we want them to understand it and our efforts to comprehend the world of those around us. As Robert Craig (2007) describes, “A first-order constitutive model of communication posits that communication, rather than merely a neutral conduit for transmitting independently existing information, is the primary social process through which our meaningful common world is constructed.” As a process for the construction of shared realities, human communication is culturally and contextually influenced, dynamic, and ever-changing.

When this process occurs between two individuals with some type of ongoing relationship, we call the process **interpersonal communication**. When the process occurs among several individuals, we describe it as **group communication**. When large numbers of people are involved (either personally or through technological channels), we call the process **public or mass media communication**. Finally, we refer to the human communication process in organizations as **organizational communication**, the subject of our text. Whether in interpersonal, group, public, mass media/networked/telemediated, or organizational contexts, the human communication process involves attempts to construct shared realities among people to generate shared meaning. Think back to the “What Business Is This of Ours?” case. What were the shared realities at Quality Engineering? Describe the fields of experience and the context of the interaction between John and Mary. What were the noise factors? Can you predict the effect of their interaction? Will they be able to work together in the future?

A word of caution is appropriate at this point. Although we continue to describe human communication as the process of constructing shared realities and creating shared meanings and realities, we must remember shared meanings are always incomplete and characterized by ambiguity. The human communication process as an attempt to construct shared realities can represent openness and clarity but also be characterized by manipulation, control, or deceit. I can deliberately attempt to have you understand a situation as I understand it, hoping for a shared reality characterized by openness, but I can also deliberately attempt to have you understand a situation very differently from what I know the facts to be. Imagine I want you to share with me a reality that I choose but not one based on my more complete knowledge, experience, or awareness. My messages then generate a shared reality between us that is characterized by deceit. The important concept here is that the construction of meaning is an intentional process between us related to our knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values.

**Twenty-First-Century Concepts of Organizations**

We have defined and described the human communication process in a variety of possible contexts. Our particular interests are, of course, communication and organizations and how communication creates and influences organizational
processes and events. We begin to explore the relationship between communication and organizations by first identifying what an organization is and what it does. The term organization is applied to the results of the process of organizing. Organizing is an attempt to bring order out of chaos or establish organizations, entities in which purposeful and ordered activity takes place. Organizing is accomplished through purposeful activities generated as a result of communication behaviors. In other words, the process we call organizing is accomplished through human communication as individuals seek to bring order out of chaos and establish entities for purposeful activities.

Amitai Etzioni (1964) described organizations as social units or groupings of people deliberately constructed and reconstructed to strive for specific goals. As such, organizations are characterized by divisions of labor for goal achievement. These efforts also are directed by relatively continuous patterns of authority and leadership. Interdependence exists among organizational components as well as with the external environment. This complex interdependence requires coordination achieved through communication.

Katherine Miller (2003) identified five features she believed are possessed by all organizations: two or more people (a social collectivity), goals, coordinating activity, structure, and environmental embeddedness. Gerald Pepper (1995) provided a communication-based definition when he described organizations as consisting of the organizing activities of their members. Pepper argued, “Though this definition may seem circular, it really is quite descriptive of a communication explanation of organizations. The definition accounts for traditional, pyramidal organizational form just as easily as it accounts for nontraditional democratic, ‘feminist’ organizational forms, because the key to the definition is the communicative relationships among the members, rather than arbitrary components assumed to define the organization” (pp. 17–18).

Taken as a whole, these definitions and issues help us understand organizations from their structure and from the ways they continually create and change what they do and how they do it. This process occurs through communication behaviors. Put another way, understanding what an organization is and how it works requires an understanding of the process of organizational communication. Throughout the next several chapters, we explore many different types of organizations. We examine organizations with which you have personal contact and involvement. We discuss traditional hierarchical organizations, profit-making organizations, and nonprofit groups. We describe organizations in which hierarchy is replaced by flatter forms and the use of technology to create virtual groups or entire organizations. We identify family-owned, social justice, and volunteer organizations. We explore partnerships, entrepreneurial opportunities, and home-based work as well as global ventures. We look at temporary, local, regional, or global organizations. For all these “types” of organization, you will come to understand human communication behaviors as creating and shaping both relationships and events. You will come to grasp communication as constituting organizations and social realities.
Definitions of Organizational Communication

Organizational communication is both similar to and distinct from other types of communication. Organizational communication has sources and receivers who engage in the encoding and decoding of messages. Messages are transmitted over channels distorted by noise. As with other forms of communication, organizational communication is related to the competencies of individuals, their fields of experience, the communicative context, and the realities, effects, or results of interactions. Yet organizational communication is more than the daily interactions of individuals within organizations. It is the process through which organizations constitute realities through creating and shaping events. Next, we describe organizational communication as a complex interaction of process, people, messages, meaning, and purpose. In sum, we describe organizational communication as constitutive of organizations.

Organizational Communication as Process

As with other forms of communication, organizational communication is best understood as an ongoing process without distinct beginnings and ends. The process includes patterns of interactions that develop among organizational members and those external to the organization and how these interactions shape organizations.

Because the process is ever-changing, it can be described as evolutionary and culturally dependent. In other words, the ongoing process of creating and transmitting organizational messages reflects the shared agreements and disagreements resulting from previous message exchanges and evolves to generate new realities that create and shape events.

The process can be found in all types of organizations with vastly different goals. The process occurs in developing strategy, planning, decision making, and executing the work of the organization. The process also occurs, however, during unexpected crises, changes in the external environment, encounters with competitors, and in a host of less visible ways. The process occurs between individuals whether performing daily work or socializing and includes messages to large numbers of employers, customers, and stakeholders. All these interactions taken together create and shape the ongoing organization.

Organizational Communication as People

Individuals bring to organizations sets of characteristics that influence how information is processed. Organizational communication contributes to creating relationships and assists both individuals and organizations in achieving diverse purposes. Organizational communication occurs between and among people who share both work and interpersonal relationships. Organizational communication also occurs between and among people who are geographically separated and who may speak different languages and have widely differing cultural perspectives. It is fair to say that organizational communication occurs across networks of people who seek to obtain a variety of objectives requiring communication interactions.
Organizational Communication as Messages

Organizational communication is the creation and exchange of messages. It is the movement or transmission of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and the sharing of information throughout the organization. Communicators are linked together by channels, and messages are described with such terms as frequency, amount, and type. Concern is expressed for message fidelity, or the extent to which messages are similar or accurate at all links through the channels. Organizational messages increasingly are telemediated (using complex technologies), extending their geographic reach, changing notions of time and space, and altering who participates in communication processes.

Organizational Communication as Meaning

Organizational communication creates and shapes organizational events. Role taking occurs as individuals engage in social interaction within the ever-changing organizational context. Organizational communication is the symbolic behavior of individuals and organizations that, when interpreted, affects all organizational activities. Organizational communication does not create a singular set of meanings for organizational members and activities. The interactions of ever-changing behaviors often create multiple perceptions of events and multiple realities that become the process through which organizational meanings are generated.

Organizational Communication as Constitutive of Organizations

Organizational communication is organizing, decision making, planning, controlling, and coordinating. Organizational communication seeks to reduce environmental uncertainty. It is people, messages, and meaning. It is intentional and unintentional messages explaining the workings of the organization. Organizational communication reflects the purpose of the organization. It is the process through which individuals and organizations attempt goal-oriented behavior in dealing with their environments.

Stanley Deetz (1994) provided an important summary perspective to our discussion of definitions for organizational communication. Deetz suggested, “Communication, in the view I am suggesting, refers to the social processes by which meanings, identities, psychological states, social structures, and the various means of the contact of the organization with the environment are both produced, reproduced, or changed. In both its constitutive and reproductive modes, communication processes are central to how perceptions, meanings, and routines are held in common. In all interactions, including those in organizations, perception, meaning, and data transmission are all complex, multileveled phenomena produced out of and producing conflicting motives and structures” (p. 90).

Can you now answer the question about the differences between organizational and other types of communication? You should be able to do so. Whereas interpersonal and group communications occur in organizations, organizational communication is a more comprehensive process including, but not limited to, one-on-one and group exchanges. Competencies for organizational communication
include interpersonal abilities, but organizational communication competencies also require effectiveness in complex and changing environments where diverse groups of people join in purposeful activity. The goal of this book is to help you identify and develop important competencies for organizational communication. The next several chapters concentrate on knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values important in interpersonal, group, and organization-wide contexts.

Let us return to our case study. Describe the interaction between John and Mary from an organizational communication perspective. Can you identify organizational factors influencing their exchange? Do John and Mary have a work relationship, or are they communicating as friends? Can they be both? Is this an example of organizational goal-directed behavior? How might their exchange affect Quality Engineering?

It is difficult to be certain about our answers for this case. The chances are that most of us feel the need for additional information about John and Mary and Quality Engineering. Yet the lack of complete information is characteristic of many, if not most, of our organizational experiences. In fact, it is probable that even with more information we can never be certain of all the shared realities between John and Mary. Indeed, as we begin our study of organizational communication, a key to our personal development rests with our ability to analyze thoughtfully while recognizing the limits of our understanding.

Self-Assessment of Personal Development Needs: Your Personal Workbook

The last section of this book is Putting It All Together. This section contains a Personal Development Workbook designed to provide you information about you which will contribute to your personal and professional development. You will be entering data into the workbook and developing personal profiles as you move through the next eleven chapters. The information in the workbook is designed to be used by you not only for this course but for current and future planning as well.

Figure 1.1 is the first assessment in the workbook. It is located on page 411. The material in the next eleven chapters is designed to help you develop important competencies for organizational communication. Before you begin to study that material, however, please complete your Self-Assessment of Personal Development Needs. The following chapters will be more meaningful if you approach theory, practice, and analysis opportunities with a personal assessment of your current strengths and weaknesses. You are about to complete the first of several self-assessments contained in your workbook. Before you proceed, it is important to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of self-assessment. Self-assessments are generated by you about you. They can be helpful guides to understanding behavior, perceptions, and attitudes important for your communication behaviors. Self-assessment, however, is not a complete or final analysis about you. The questions asked determine the profiles developed. Sometimes we tend to answer the way we think we should as opposed to what we really believe or do. Important questions or issues for you as an individual may not be considered in a particular assessment. Also, although assessments can guide development, they should not be used
to develop profiles of “this is the way I am,” or “this is the way I am not.” In other words, the self-assessments in the text should be used to stimulate your thinking about you and your experiences, not to develop rigid categories or self-descriptive labels.

Chapter Highlights

The information-rich conceptual world is a reality of our lives that places increasing importance on our individual communication competencies. Organizations of today and tomorrow must depend on people and the machines of the communications era to solve problems creatively and to adapt to rapid change. In this fast-paced environment, organizational excellence is directly related to effective communication from all members of the organization. To prepare for the communication responsibilities and opportunities of the future, individuals need to develop broad-based communication competency. Communication competency is best understood as a complex interaction of knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values.

Human communication is the process through which we attempt to construct shared realities. The human communication process includes sources and receivers, message encoding and decoding, channels, noise, communicative competence, participants’ fields of experience, contexts, and realities and effects. The process is evaluated for effectiveness and ethical behaviors, with these evaluations influencing future interactions. Organizations are the products of organizing activities and can be described as deliberately constructed social units designed to strive for specific goals. As such, organizations are dynamic mergers of human behaviors and technological operations. Organizational communication includes all the descriptors in the human communication process. It is also the process through which organizations are created and in turn create and shape events. As such, organizational communication can be understood as a combination of process, people, messages, meaning, and purpose. In sum, we describe organizational communication as constitutive of organizations.

Workshop

1. A major case is provided in the Putting It All Together section of this book. The case, Hockaday Responders: Teams Across Time and Space, is designed for you to apply what you learn in each chapter to the issues faced by Hockaday Responders. Please read the case on page 400 and discuss in class the questions for Chapter 1 posed at the end of the case.

2. Small groups should use The Case against Hiring Karen Groves, which follows, to determine how communication behaviors influenced Munday's management team to vote against hiring Karen Groves.

3. Visit one of the numerous job-search sites on the Internet. Identify at least fifty job titles that represent information/communication jobs. Bring your list to class for discussion.

4. Identify all the organizations of which you are a member. Include the school you currently attend. Describe shared realities for each organization. Discuss as a class the shared realities of your school.

5. Shared meanings or shared realities are what organizational communication is all about. My Meaning, Your Meaning, Our Meanings, an exercise to illustrate the importance of meanings and shared realities, is found below. Divide the class into groups of six members...
each and complete the exercise. Discuss what you have learned about meanings and shared realities.

6. The following case, “What Do You Mean I’m Not Getting a Raise?” illustrates organizational messages with multiple meanings. Study the case and attempt to understand how people receiving the same message can arrive at very different meanings.

My Meaning, Your Meaning, Our Meanings

Read each of the following four statements and write your response. You may agree, disagree, or take no position on the statement. Your response should accurately reflect the statement’s meaning to you.

1. Oral skills are more important than written communication skills for most jobs. I (agree with, disagree with, don’t know about) this statement. It means to me.…

2. People who are the most intelligent make the best grades and are the most successful. I (agree with, disagree with, don’t know about) this statement. It means to me.…

3. The successful organizational member must be competitive and persuasive. I (agree with, disagree with, don’t know about) this statement. It means to me.…

4. The successful organizational member is more analytical than others and believes technical skills are more important than communication abilities. I (agree with, disagree with, don’t know about) this statement. It means to me.…

Discuss your responses and compare similarities and differences in groups of six. What influenced the similarities and differences in your answers? How do these influences contribute to the meanings we assign to messages?

Next, consider the following four professions: minister, salesperson, lawyer, television executive. As a group, attempt to determine how you think that most people in these professions would react to the four statements. Again, what does that tell us about how meanings are influenced? How accurate can you be about your perceptions of the meanings others might assign?

Finally, as a group, attempt to develop a response to each statement that all group members can support. (Total agreement is not necessary, only general support.) How do these group statements differ from your individual statements? Did your statements become a shared reality for your group? If so, why? If not, why not? (If time permits, compare your group’s statements with those of other groups in your class. What are the similarities and differences? Are there any surprises?)

The Case Against Hiring Karen Groves

John Murphy, the head of personnel for Munday Corporation, was excited about the application of Karen Groves to become Munday’s new training director. Karen’s educational background in organizational communication and business, her work in the training department of a major competitor of Munday’s, and her excellent letters of recommendation made her an appealing candidate. John’s initial interview with Karen had gone well and he was anxious for her to meet Munday’s management staff, who approved John’s hiring decisions for major company positions.

John was surprised and dismayed when Munday’s president reported to John that the staff did not favor hiring Karen. According to the president, Karen surprised the group when she said _______ and _______. They did not believe that she would be good for Munday? because of her _______.


In groups of four to six members, fill in the blanks to account for what might have happened to create the case against hiring Karen. Describe how the communication abilities of all involved may have contributed to the negative decision. Following individual group discussions, each group should present to the class as a whole its members’ description of the situation and how they believe communication affected the outcome.

The “What Do You Mean I’m Not Getting A Raise?” Case

Jane Jackson, division manager of AMC, Inc., had spent the day in the cafeteria meeting with each of AMC’s three manufacturing shifts. She had good news and had been eager to make the announcement that the company would not begin the layoffs rumored to occur at the end of the present round of contracts. Instead of layoffs, management had decided to freeze wages and evaluate in six months when cost-of-living and merit increases could resume. Jane had been careful with the announcement, reading the press release exactly as it was written from corporate headquarters.

Following her cafeteria meetings, Jane asked her section managers to meet with individual supervisors on each of the three shifts to determine how the news was being received. Jane had been concerned about the layoff rumors and expected a generally favorable response to the announcement. She was not prepared for her section managers’ feedback. Several supervisors reported that although there was considerable relief that layoffs were not imminent, many workers did not understand that they would not receive their annual increases at performance appraisal time. Numerous workers believed management intended to consider layoffs again at the end of the six-month freeze period, and others thought that the wage freeze meant no new people were being hired. Jane could not understand how all this confusion was possible. After all, everyone got exactly the same message.

What would you tell Jane about messages and meanings? What are the probable reasons for this confusion? What would you do if you were Jane and her section managers?

Tips for Effective Communication

1. Ask for (and listen to) feedback on your communication strengths and weaknesses.
2. Identify which new communications technologies you should learn. Make a plan for skill development.
3. Identify three excellent communicators with whom you can talk. Ask them for personal advice about communication.
4. Give at least five speeches during the upcoming year.
5. Practice asking others to describe what they think you meant when having important conversations. Listen, and learn to clarify if descriptions do not match your intentions.
References and Suggested Readings