Chapter 1: Introduction to Interpersonal Communication

Chapter Summary

We often take our ability to communicate for granted, and the majority of people living in the United States believe they communicate well. However, some people experience communication apprehension in uncomfortable situations, and all of us can improve our interpersonal communication skills in some way.

Interpersonal communication is a complex process that is unique from other forms of communication, such as intrapersonal, small group, organizational, mass, and public. The definition of interpersonal communication has evolved over the years as several models of communication have been advanced. The earliest, the linear model, says that communication is a one-way process in which a sender transmits a message to a receiver. In this model, several types of noise--physiological, physical, psychological, or semantic--can interfere with a message while it's being transmitted. The linear view also specifies that context--be it physical, cultural, or social-emotional--affects communication. The drawback of this model is that it fails to account for the receiver as an active participant in conversations.

According to the interactional model, communication goes from sender to receiver and from receiver to sender. This approach focuses on feedback, which can consist of words (verbal) or body language (nonverbal). Feedback can be internal, meaning you assess your own communication, or external, meaning you receive feedback from others. The drawback of this model is that it assumes that nonverbal and verbal messages cannot be sent concurrently.

The transactional model views communication as a cooperative process in which the sender and receiver are both responsible for the effectiveness of communication. In this model, messages build upon each other as people negotiate shared meaning. This model also takes into account people's fields of experience, which are their culture, heredity, and personal history. The more people's fields of experience overlap, the more they have in common, which can lead to more and deeper personal communication. The transactional model may soon become a bit outdated because technological communication, such as email, may affect scholars' view of the communication process.

Another way to understand the nature of interpersonal communication is to look at the interpersonal communication continuum. Interactions come in all degrees of closeness, not just the extremes of impersonal and interpersonal, which are at either end of the continuum. Where an interaction falls on the continuum depends on the relational history, relational rules, and relational uniqueness of the people involved.

After you understand the definition, evolution, and nature of interpersonal communication, you can appreciate its value. Employers look for strong interpersonal skills in their employees, and good communication skills can reap personal benefits as well. To make the most of interpersonal communication, you need to understand that it is
unavoidable, is irreversible, involves symbol exchange, is rule-governed, is learned, and involves both content and relationship dimensions. Also, you need to avoid the common myths of interpersonal communication, such as that it will solve all your problems, is always a good thing, is common sense, is synonymous with interpersonal relationships, and is always face to face.

Finally, you have to understand the ethics--that is, the perceived rightness or wrongness of an action or behavior--involved in interpersonal communication. Five systems--categorical imperative, utilitarianism, ethic of care, golden mean, and significant choice--can guide you, but ultimately you need to understand your own values as well as the consequences of your actions. This book is geared to improve your communication competency and civility in the changing times in which we live.