Chapter 2: Communication, Perception, and the Self

Chapter Summary

A significant part of our interpersonal communication effectiveness is based upon our perceptions and on our self-concepts. Our perceptions are influenced by our self-identity, and our self-identity is influenced by our perceptions. The two are inseparable in our communication with others.

Perception is the process of using our physical senses to respond to the world around us. The perception process occurs in four stages: attending and selecting, organizing, interpreting, and retrieving. In the attending and selecting stage, we use our senses to respond to our interpersonal environment, then decide which stimuli we will attend to. In the organizing stage, we order the information we have selected so that it is understandable and accessible. In the interpreting stage, we assign meaning to what we perceive, based on our relational history, personal expectations, and knowledge of ourselves and others. In the retrieving stage, we recall information we have stored in our memories, which affects how we communicate with others. Perception is influenced by many factors, including culture, sex and gender, physical factors, technology, and self-concept.

A person's self-concept is the relatively stable set of perceptions a person holds of himself or herself. Our self-concept is shaped by self-awareness, an understanding of who we are; by self-esteem, an evaluation of who we perceive ourselves to be; and by self-fulfilling prophecy, predictions we make about ourselves.

An important component of the self is identity management, or the ways we handle various interpersonal situations to influence how others perceive us. When we present our identity to others, we are presenting a particular sense of self. The image of the self we present to others is called face, and we typically present two types of face in our interactions with others: positive face and negative face. Positive face is our desire to be liked, understood, and respected by others. Negative face is our desire for others to respect our individuality and to refrain from imposing their will on us.

After ridding yourself of your predisposed biases, you can employ several skills to improve your perceptual abilities. First, understand your personal worldview, or personal frame for viewing life and life's events. Second, be aware of why you choose to select and attend to particular stimuli in your interpersonal environment over others, and check your perceptions as needed. Third, check in with others to make sure you are accurately perceiving a person, situation, or event. Fourth, distinguish facts from inferences. And fifth, practice being patient and tolerant.

In addition, you can implement five strategies to improve your self-concept. First, have the desire and will to work at changing your self-concept. Second, make the decision to change and be specific about what you will change. Third, set reason-able personal goals for changing so that you experience success and avoid a sense of failure. Fourth, review
and revise your changing self-concept as needed, retaining those changes that are beneficial. And fifth, surround yourself with "relational uppers," people who support and trust you as you work to improve your self-concept.