6.0: Chapter Introduction

Introductory Exercises

___ 1. phat
___ 2. dis
___ 3. wack
___ 4. Smack
___ 5. down
___ 6. hooptie
___ 7. my bad
___ 8. player
___ 9. tight
___ 10. jet

A. Weird, strange, unfair or not acceptable
B. Something stupid or thoughtless, deserving correction
C. Excellent, together, cool
D. Old car, generally in poor but serviceable condition
E. Insult, put down, to dishonor, to display disrespect
F. Get out or leave quickly
G. Cool, very interesting, fantastic or amazing
H. To be in agreement
I. Personal mistake
J. Person dating with multiple partners, often unaware

1. Can you match the words above to their meaning?

2. Do people use the same language in all settings and contexts? Your first answer might be “sure,” but try this test. For a couple of hours or even a day, pay attention to how you speak, and how others speak: the words you say, how you say them, the pacing and timing used in each context. For example, at home in the morning, in the coffee shop before work or class, during a break at work with peers or a break between classes with classmates all count
as contexts. Observe how and what language is used in each context and to what degree they are the same or different.

3. It's not just what you say but how you say it. Choose a speech to watch. Examples may include famous speeches by historical figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. or Winston Churchill, current elected officials, or perhaps candidates for local and state office that may be televised. Other examples could be from a poetry slam, a rap performance, or a movie. Watch the presentation without sound and see what you observe. Does the speaker seem comfortable and confident? Aggressive or timid? If possible, repeat the speech a second time with the sound on. Do your perceptions change? What patterns do you observe?

4. Invasion of space. When someone “invades” your space, how do you feel? Threatened, surprised, interested, or repulsed? When can learn a lot from each other as we come to be more aware of normative space expectations and boundaries. Set aside 10 minutes where you can “people watch” in a public setting. Make a conscious effort to notice how far apart they stand from people they communicate. Record your results. Your best estimate is fine and there is no need to interrupt people, just watch and record. Consider noting if they are male or female, or focus only on same-sex conversations. When you have approximate distances for at least 20 conversations or 10 minutes have passed, add up the results and look for a pattern. Compare your findings with those of a classmate.

Answer

Answers to #1:

1-C, 2-E, 3-A, 4-B, 5-H, 6-D, 7-I, 8-J, 9-G, 10-F

Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh


S. I. Hayakawa

The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.

Peter F. Drucker

Getting Started

Successful group communication is often associated with writing and speaking well, being articulate or proficient with words. Yet, in the quote above, the famous linguist S. I. Hayakawa wisely observes that meaning lies within us, not in the words we use. Indeed, communication in this text is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning. Pearson, J., & Nelson, P. (2000). An introduction to human communication: understanding and sharing. Boston: McGraw-Hill. When you communicate you are sharing meaning with one or more other people—this may include members of your family, your community, your work community, your school, or any group that considers itself a group.

How do you communicate? How do you think? We use language as a system to create and exchange meaning with one another, and the types of words we use influence both our perceptions and others interpretation of our meanings. What kinds of words would you use to describe your thoughts and feelings, your preferences in music, cars, food, or other
things that matter to you?

Imagine that you are using written or spoken language to create a bridge over which you hope to transport meaning, much like a gift or package, to your receiver. You hope that your meaning arrives relatively intact, so that your receiver receives something like what you sent. Will the package look the same to them on the receiving end? Will they interpret the package, its wrapping and colors, the way you intended? That depends. What is certain is that they will interpret it based on their framework of experience. The package represents your words arranged in a pattern that both the source (you) and the receiver (your group) can interpret. The words as a package try to contain the meaning and deliver it intact, but they themselves are not the meaning. That lies within us. So is the package empty? Are the words we use empty? Without us to give them life and meaning, the answer is yes. Knowing what words will correspond to meanings that your group members hold within themselves will help you communicate more effectively. Professional jargon can be quite appropriate, even preferred, when everyone around the table understands the terminology. Knowing what meanings lie within you is your door to understanding yourself.

In this chapter’s third Introductory Exercise, we focus on how a person presents ideas, not the ideas themselves. Have you ever been in class and found it hard to listen to the professor, not because he or she wasn’t well informed or the topic wasn’t interesting or important to you, but because the style of presentation didn’t engage you as a listener? If your answer is yes, then you know that you want to avoid making the same mistake when you share information with your group or team. It’s not always what you say, but how you say it that makes a difference. We sometimes call this “body language,” or “nonverbal communication,” and it is a key aspect of effective group communication.

One common concern is when to present your idea within a group setting to make sure it gets considered. Timing is an important aspect of nonverbal communication, but trying to understand what a single example of timing means is challenging. Context may make a difference. For example, if you have known the group member for years and they have always responded positively to your input, you may not have reason for concern. If their behavior doesn’t match what you are familiar with, and this sudden, unexplained change in the established pattern may mean that you need to follow up. Group dynamics, like communication itself, is constantly changing.

This chapter discusses the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication. It examines how the characteristics of language interact in ways that can both improve and diminish effective group communication. We will examine how language plays a significant role in how you perceive and interact with the world, and how culture, language, education, gender, race, and ethnicity all influence this dynamic process. We will look at ways to avoid miscommunication and focus on constructive ways to improve effective group communication.