1.3: Communication Competence

Learning Outcomes

1. Explain competence.
2. Distinguish between social appropriateness and personal effectiveness and their relationship to communication competence.
3. Identify characteristics of competence.

Defining Competence

Brian Spitzberg (2000) argued that communication competence involved being both appropriate and effective. Appropriate communication is what most people would consider acceptable behaviors. Effective communication is getting your desired personal outcome.

You might think about communicators who were appropriate but not effective and vice versa. The two characteristics go hand in hand. You need to have both to be considered competent. Think about coaches who might say horrible or inappropriate things to their players to motivate them. This may be viewed as highly effective to some, but possibly very inappropriate to others. Especially if you are not used to harsh language or foul language, then your perceptions could hinder how you feel about the speaker. At the same time, you might have individuals that are highly appropriate but are not effective. They may say the right things, but cannot get any results. For instance, imagine a mother who is trying over and over to get her child to brush their teeth. She might try praises or persuasive techniques, but if the child doesn’t brush their teeth, then she is not accomplishing her goal. You truly need a balance between the two.
Understanding Competence

First of all, no one way of communicating will be best or most effective for everyone. Think about the speakers that you know. Perhaps, some are more charismatic, humorous, assertive, and timid than others. Just as there are many types of speakers and speaking styles, there are different types of competent communicators. For example, a joke in one context might be hilarious, but that same joke might be very offensive in another context. What this tells us is that there is no guaranteed or definite method that will work in every situation. Communication that works in one context and not another depends on the culture and the characteristics of the person or persons receiving the message.

Moreover, we know that communication varies from one context to another. For instance, kindergarten teachers may be wonderful in a room full of five-year-olds, but if you asked them to present in a college classroom, they might get a little nervous because the situation is different. Some situations are better for certain speakers than others. Some people can rise to the occasion and truly deliver a memorable speech in a moment of crisis. However, if you asked them to do it again, they might not be able to do so because of the situational variables that influenced the speech. Some individuals are wonderful public speakers but are truly unable to communicate in interpersonal relationships and vice versa. These situations occur because some people feel more comfortable in certain settings than others. Hence, competency can vary depending on the type of communication.

Also, competence can be taught. The main reason why taking a communication course is so important is to be a better speaker. Hence, this is why many schools make it a requirement for college students. Think about an invention or idea you might have. If you can’t communicate that idea or invention, then it will probably never come to fruition.

Characteristics of Competence

Now that you know more about competence, it is important to note that competent communicators often share many similar characteristics. Studies on competence illustrate that competent communicators have distinctive characteristics that differ from incompetent communicators. We will discuss a few of these characteristics in this section.

Skillful

First, many competent communicators are skillful. In other words, they use situational cues to figure out which approach might be best. Think about a car salesperson and about how she/he will approach a customer who is wanting to make a purchase. If the salesperson is too aggressive, then they might lose a sale. For that reason, they need to cater to their customer and make sure that they meet their customer’s needs. The salesperson might directly approach the customer by simply saying, “Hi I’m Jamie, I would be happy to help you today,” or by asking questions like, “I see you looking at cars today. Are you interested in a particular model?” or they could ask the customer to talk more by saying, “Can you tell me more about what you are looking for?” And perhaps, a salesperson could even compliment the customer. Each of these strategies illustrates how a salesperson can be skillful in meeting the customer’s expectations and, at the same time, fulfilling their own goals. Just like a chef has many ingredients to use to prepare a dish, a competent communicator possesses many skills to use depending on the situation.
Adaptable

Second, competent communicators are adaptable. I am sure you might have seen a speaker who uses technology like PowerPoint to make their presentations. What happens if technology fails, does the speaker perform poorly as well? Competent communicators would not let technology stop them from presenting their message. They can perform under pressure and any type of constraint. For instance, if the communicator is presenting and notices that the audience has become bored, then they might change up their presentation and make it more exciting and lively to incite the audience.

Involved

Third, competent communicators can get others involved. Competent communicators think about their audience and being understood. They can get people excited about a cause or effort and create awareness or action. Think about motivational speakers and how they get people encouraged to do something. Competent communicators are also persuasive; they have the skill to involve their audience to do something such as protest, vote, or donate. Think about politicians who make speeches and provide so many interesting statements that people are more inclined to vote in a certain direction.

Understands Their Audience

Fourth, competent communicators can understand their audience. Keeping with the same example of politicians, many of them will say things like, “I know what it is like not to be able to feed your family, to struggle to make ends meet, or not to have a job. I know what you are going through. I understand where you are coming from.” These phrases are ways to create a bond between the speaker and the receiver of the message. Competent communicators can empathize and figure out the best way to approach the situation. For instance, if someone you know had a miscarriage and truly has wanted to have kids for a long time, then it would probably be very inconsiderate to say, “just try again.” This comment would be very rude, especially if this person has already tried for a long time to have a child. A competent communicator would have to think about how this person might feel and what words would genuinely be more appropriate to the situation.

Cognitive Complexity

Fifth, knowing how to say the same thing in different ways is called cognitive complexity. You might think that the only way to express affection would be to say, “I love you” or “I care about you." What other ways could you express affection? This skill is being cognitively complex. Think about a professor you might have had that used different methods to solve the same problem. Your professor might say, “To solve this problem, you might try method A, and if that doesn’t work, you could try method B, and method C is still another way.” This illustrates that you don’t have to say things one way, you could say it in different ways. This helps your audience understand your message better because you provided different ways to comprehend your intended message.

Self-Monitoring

The last characteristic of competent communicators is the ability to monitor yourself. Also known as self-monitoring. This is the ability to focus on your behavior, and, in turn, determine how to behave in the situation. In every speaking
situation, most people will have an internal gauge of what they might say next or not say. Some people never give any thought to what they might say to others. These individuals would have low self-monitoring skills, in which what you see is what you get. You could have high self-monitors that pay attention to every little thing, how they stand, where their eyes move, how they gesture, and maybe even how they breathe. They pay attention to these minor details because they are concerned with how the message might come across to others. Competent communicators have a balance of high and low self-monitoring, in which they realize how they might be perceived, but they are not overly focused on all the details of themselves.

Key Takeaways

- Competence involves being both appropriate and effective.
- Appropriateness refers to communicative behaviors that are socially acceptable behaviors; whereas, effectiveness refers to communicative behaviors that help achieve a desired outcome.
- Characteristics of competence involve skill, adaptability, involvement, complexity, and empathy.

Exercises

- Who do you think are competent/incompetent communicators? Why?
- How would you rate yourself as a competent speaker? Give a brief impromptu speech, then ask someone to rate you based on the characteristics of competence. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Using cognitive complexity skills, think about all the ways you can express affection/hatred. Talk about how these ways would be interpreted by others — positively/negatively and why? Does it matter if the other person was a different sex, culture, gender, ethnicity, age, or religion? How and why