2.2: Elements of Interpersonal Communication

Learning Outcomes

1. Understand that communication is a process.
2. Differentiate among the components of communication processes and communication models.
3. Describe the differences between the sender and receiver of a message.

You may think that communication is easy. However, at moments in your life, communication might be hard and difficult to understand. We can study communication similar to the way we study other systems. There are elements to the communication process that are important to understand. Each interaction that we have will typically include a sender, receiver, message, channel, feedback, and noise. Let’s take a closer look at each one.

Sender

Humans encode messages naturally, and we don’t often consider this part of the process. However, if you have ever thought about the exact words that you would use to get a later curfew from your parents/guardians and how you might refute any counterpoints, then you intuitively know that choosing the right words – “encoding” – weighed heavily in your ability to influence your parents/guardians successfully. The language you chose mattered.

The sender is the encoder or source of the message. The sender is the person who decides to communicate and the intent of the message. The source may decide to send messages to entertain, persuade, inform, include, or escape. Often, the sources will create a message based on their feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and past experiences. For instance, if you have feelings of affection towards someone but never communicate those feelings toward that person, they will never know. The sender can withhold or release information.
Receiver

The transactional model of communication teaches us that we are both the sender and receiver simultaneously. The receiver(s) is the individual who decodes the message and tries to understand the source of the message. Receivers have to filter messages based on their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, values, history, and prejudices. People will encode messages through their five senses. We have to pay attention to the source of the message to receive the message. If the receiver does not get the message, then communication did not occur. The receiver needs to obtain a message.

Daily, you will receive several messages. Some of these messages are intentional. And some of these messages will be unintentional. For instance, a person waving in your direction might be waving to someone behind you, but you accidentally think they are waving at you. Some messages will be easy to understand, and some messages will be hard to interpret. Every time a person sends a message, they are also receiving messages simultaneously.

Message

Messages include any type of textual, verbal, and nonverbal aspects of communication, in which individuals give meaning. People send messages intentionally (texting a friend to meet for coffee) or unintentionally (accidentally falling asleep during lectures). Messages can be verbal (saying hello to your parents/guardians), nonverbal (hugging your parents/guardians), or text (words on a computer screen). Essentially, communication is how messages create meaning. Yet, meanings differ among people. For instance, a friend of yours promises to repay you for the money they borrowed, and they say “sorry” for not having any money to give you. You might think they were insincere, but another person might think that it was a genuine apology. People can vary in their interpretations of messages.

Channel

With advances in technology, cell phones act as many different channels of communication at once. Consider that smartphones allow us to talk and text. Also, we can receive communication through Facebook, Twitter, Email, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and Vox. All of these channels are in addition to our traditional channels, which were face-to-face communication, letter writing, telegram, and the telephone. The addition of these new communication channels has changed our lives forever. The channel is the medium in which we communicate our message. Think about breaking up a romantic relationship. Would you rather do it via face-to-face or via a text message? Why did you answer the way that you did? The channel can impact the message.

Now, think about how you hear important news. Do you learn about it from the Internet, social media, television, newspaper, or others? The channel is the medium in which you learn about information.

It may seem like a silly thing to talk about channels, but a channel can make an impact on how people receive the message. For instance, a true story tells about a professional athlete who proposed marriage to his girlfriend by sending her the ring through the postal mail service. He sent her a ring and a recorded message asking her to marry him. She declined his proposal and refused to return the ring. In this case, the channel might have been better if he asked her face-to-face.

Just be mindful of how the channel can affect the way that a receiver reacts and responds to your message. For
instance, a handwritten love letter might be more romantic than a typed email. On the other hand, if there was some tragic news about your family, you would probably want someone to call you immediately rather than sending you a letter.

Overall, people naturally know that the message impacts which channel they might use. In a research study focused on channels, college students were asked about the best channels for delivering messages. College students said that they would communicate face-to-face if the message was positive, but use mediated channels if the message was negative.

Feedback

Feedback is the response to the message. If there is no feedback, communication would not be effective. Feedback is important because the sender needs to know if the receiver got the message. Simultaneously, the receiver usually will give the sender some sort of message that they comprehend what has been said. If there is no feedback or if it seems that the receiver did not understand the message, then it is negative feedback. However, if the receiver understood the message, then it is positive feedback. Positive feedback does not mean that the receiver entirely agrees with the sender of the message, but rather the message was comprehended. Sometimes feedback is not positive or negative; it can be ambiguous. Examples of ambiguous feedback might include saying “hmmm” or “interesting.” Based on these responses, it is not clear if the receiver of the message understood part or the entire message. It is important to note that feedback doesn’t have to come from other people. Sometimes, we can be critical of our own words when we write them in a text or say them out loud. We might correct our words and change how we communicate based on our internal feedback.

Environment

The context or situation where communication occurs and affects the experience is referred to as the environment. We know that the way you communicate in a professional context might be different than in a personal context. In other words, you probably won’t talk to your boss the same way you would talk to your best friend. (An exception might be if your best friend was also your boss). The environment will affect how you communicate. For instance, in a library, you might talk more quietly than normal so that you don’t disturb other library patrons. However, in a nightclub or bar, you might speak louder than normal due to the other people talking, music, or noise. Hence, the environment makes a difference in the way in which you communicate with others.

It is also important to note that environments can be related to fields of experience or a person’s past experiences or background. For instance, a town hall meeting that plans to cut primary access to lower socioeconomic residents might be perceived differently by individuals who use these services and those who do not. Environments might overlap, but sometimes they do not. Some people in college have had many family members who attended the same school, but other people do not have any family members that ever attended college.

Noise

Anything that interferes with the message is called noise. Noise keeps the message from being completely understood by the receiver. If noise is absent, then the message would be accurate. However, usually, noise impacts the message
in some way. Noise might be physical (e.g., television, cell phone, fan), or it might be psychological (e.g., thinking about your parents/guardians or missing someone you love). Noise is anything that hinders or distorts the message.

There are four types of noise. The first type is physical noise. This is noise that comes from a physical object. For instance, people talking, birds chirping, a jackhammer pounding concrete, a car revving by, are all different types of physical noise.

The second type of noise is psychological noise. This is the noise that no one else can see unless you are a mind reader. It is the noise that occurs in a person’s mind, such as frustration, anger, happiness, or depression. When you talk to a person, they might act and behave like nothing is wrong, but deep inside their mind, they might be dealing with a lot of other issues or problems. Hence, psychological noise is difficult to see or understand because it happens in the other person’s mind.

The third type of noise is semantic noise, which deals with language. This could refer to jargon, accents, or language use. Sometimes our messages are not understood by others because of the word choice. For instance, if a person used the word “lit,” it would probably depend on the other words accompanying the word “lit” and or the context. To say that “this party is lit” would mean something different compared to “he lit a cigarette.” If you were coming from another country, that word might mean something different. Hence, sometimes language-related problems, where the receiver can’t understand the message, are referred to as semantic noise.

The fourth and last type of noise is called physiological noise. This type of noise is because the receiver’s body interferes or hinders the acceptance of a message. For instance, if the person is blind, they are unable to see any written messages that you might send. If the person is deaf, then they are unable to hear any spoken messages. If the person is very hungry, then they might pay more attention to their hunger than any other message.

Mindfulness Activity

We live in a world where there is constant noise. Practice being mindful of sound. Find a secluded spot and just close your eyes. Focus on the sounds around you. Do you notice certain sounds more than others? Why? Is it because you place more importance on those sounds compared to other sounds?

Sounds can be helpful to your application of mindfulness. Some people prefer paying attention to sounds rather than their breath when meditating. The purpose of this activity is to see if you can discern some sounds more than others. Some people might find these sounds noisy and very distracting. Others might find the sounds calming and relaxing.

If you watch old episodes of Superman, you might see scenes where he has to concentrate on hearing the sounds of someone calling for help. Superman can filter all the other sounds in the world to figure out where he needs to focus his attention.

There will be many times in life where you will be distracted because you might be overwhelmed with all the noise. It is essential to take a few minutes, just to be mindful of the noise and how you can deal with all the distractions. Once you are aware of the things that trigger these distractions or noise, then you will be able to be more focused and to be a
better communicator.

Key Takeaways

- Communication is a process because senders and receivers act as senders and receivers simultaneously, with the receiver’s feedback serving as a key element to continuing the process.
- The components of the communication process involve the source, sender, channel, message, environment, and noise.

Exercises

- Think of your most recent communication with another individual. Write down this conversation and, within the conversation, identify the components of the communication process.
- Think about the different types of noise that affect communication. Can you list some examples of how noise can make communication worse?
- Think about the advantages and disadvantages of different channels. Write down the pros and cons of the different channels of communication.