The Importance of Effective Communication

In an age of electronic communication, the most frequently used means of passing messages to other people is via electronic technology (Friedman & Currall, n.d.; Gackenbach, 1998). E-mail now dominates communication channels in organizations, and it is purported to enhance information flow, the sharing of knowledge, consistency of communication, quality of feedback, and speed or cycle time (Council of Communication Management, 1996; Synopsis Communication Consulting, 1998). However, international surveys indicate that face-to-face communication is still the second most frequent form of communication, but it remains the most problematic (Rosen, 1998). One report concluded: "Technology is ahead of people's ability to cope and use it; it's becoming part of the problem, not part of the solution" (Synopsis Communication Consulting, 1998).

The problems with electronic communication are that: (1) people are bombarded with an overabundance of information, often poorly presented, so they are less willing to consume all the messages aimed at them; (2) no one puts all these rapid-fire messages in context, so much of the information lacks significance or meaning; and (3) effective interpretation and use of the information still depends on the relationship the recipient has with the sender. Accurate interpretation and effective message delivery depends on relationships of trust and shared context. Technology doesn't make messages more useful unless good interpersonal relationships are in place first. Simply put, relationships determine meaning.

Of course, some relationships can be created electronically, but meaningful relationships based on trust are the exceptions rather than the rule. In a study of problems in marital relationships, 87 percent said that communication problems were the root, double that of any other kind of problem (see Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2002; Honeycutt & Wiemann, 1999). For the most part, the conclusion of a recent international study of communications in the workplace summarizes the key to effective communication: "To make the most of electronic communication requires learning to communicate better face-to-face" (Rosen, 1998).

Surveys have consistently shown that the ability to effectively communicate face-to-face is the characteristic judged by managers to be most critical in determining promotability (see surveys reported by Bowman, 1964; Brownell, 1986, 1990; Hargie, 1997; Randle, 1956; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Wardrope, 2002). Frequently, the quality of communication between managers and their employees is fairly low (Gorman, 2003; Sanchez & Dempsey, 2002; Schnake et al., 1990). This ability may involve a broad array of activities, from writing to speech making to body language. Whereas skill in each of these activities, is important, for most managers it is face-to-face, one-on-one communication that dominates all the other types in predicting managerial success. In a study of 88 organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, Crocker (1978) found that, of 31 skills assessed, interpersonal communication skills, including listening, were rated as the most important. Spitzberg (1994) conducted a comprehensive review of the interpersonal competence literature and found convincing and unequivocal evidence that incompetence in interpersonal communication is "very damaging personally, relationally, and socially." Thorton (1966: 237) summarized a variety of survey results by stating, "A manager's number-one problem can be summed up in one word: communication."

At least 80 percent of a manager's waking hours are spent in verbal communication, so it is not surprising that serious attention has been given to a plethora of procedures to improve interpersonal communication. Scholars and researchers have written extensively on communicology, semantics, rhetoric, linguistics, cybernetics, syntactics, pragmatics, proxemics, and canalization; and library shelves are filled with books on the physics of the communication process—encoding, decoding, transmission, media, perception, reception, and noise. Similarly, volumes are available on effective public speaking techniques, making formal presentations, and the processes of organizational communication. Most colleges and universities have academic departments dedicated to the field of speech communication; most business schools provide a business communication curriculum; and many organizations have public communication departments and intraorganizational communication specialists such as newsletter editors and speech writers.

Even with all this available information about the communication process and the dedicated resources in many organizations for fostering better communication, most managers still indicate that poor communication is their biggest problem (Schnake et al., 1990). In a study of major manufacturing organizations undergoing large-scale changes, Cameron (1994) asked two key questions: (1) What is your major problem in trying to get organizational changes implemented? and (2) What is the key factor that explains your past success in effectively managing organizational change? To both questions, a large majority of managers gave the same answer: communication. All of them agreed that more communication is better than less communication. Most thought that overcommunicating with employees was more a virtue than a vice. It would seem surprising, then, that in light of this agreement by managers about the importance of communication, communication remains a major problem for managers. Why might this be?

One reason is that most individuals feel that they are very effective communicators. They feel that communication problems are a product of others' weaknesses, not their own (Brownell, 1990; Carrell & Willmington, 1996; Golen, 1990). Haney (1992: 218) reported on a survey of over 13,000 people in universities, businesses, military units, government agencies, and hospitals in which "virtually everyone felt that he or she was communicating at least as well as and, in many cases, better than almost everyone else in the organization. Most people readily admit that their organization is fraught with faulty communication, but it is almost always 'those other people' who are responsible." Thus, while most agree that proficiency in interpersonal communication is critical to managerial success, most individuals don't seem to feel a strong need to improve their own skill level (Spitzberg, 1994).

THE FOCUS ON ACCURACY

Much of the writing on interpersonal communication focuses on the *accuracy* of the information being communicated. The emphasis is generally on making certain that messages are transmitted and received with little alteration or variation from original intent. The communication skill of most concern is the ability to transmit clear, precise messages. The following incidents illustrate problems that result from inaccurate communication:

A motorist was driving on the Merritt Parkway outside New York City when his engine stalled. He quickly determined that his battery was dead and managed to stop another driver who consented to push his car to get it started.

"My car has an automatic transmission," he explained, "so you'll have to get up to 30 or 35 miles an hour to get me started."

The second motorist nodded and walked back to his own car. The first motorist climbed back into his car and waited for the good Samaritan to pull up behind him. He waited—and waited. Finally, he turned around to see what was wrong.

There was the good Samaritan—coming up behind his car at about 35 miles an hour!

The damage amounted to $3,800. (Haney, 1992: 285)

A woman of 35 came in one day to tell me that she wanted a baby but had been told that she had a certain type of heart disease that, while it might not interfere with a normal life, would be dangerous if she ever had a baby. From her description, I thought at once of mitral stenosis. This condition is characterized by a rather distinctive rumbling murmur near the apex of the heart and especially by a peculiar vibration felt by the examining finger on the patient's chest. The vibration is known as the "thrill" of mitral stenosis.

When this woman had undressed and was lying on my table in her white kimono, my stethoscope quickly found the heart sounds I had expected. Dictating to my nurse, I described them carefully. I put my stethoscope aside and felt intently for the typical vibration which may be found in a small and variable area of the left chest.

I closed my eyes for better concentration and felt long and carefully for the tremor. I did not find it, and with my hand still on the woman's bare breast, lifting it upward and out of the way, I finally turned to the nurse and said: "No thrill."

The patient's black eyes snapped, and with venom in her voice, she said, "Well, isn't that just too bad! Perhaps it's just as well you don't get one. That isn't what I came for."

My nurse almost choked, and my explanation still seems a nightmare of futile words. (Loomis, 1939: 47)

In a Detroit suburb, a man walked onto a private plane and greeted the co-pilot with, "Hi, Jack!" The salutation, picked up by a microphone in the cockpit and interpreted as "hijack" by control tower personnel, caused police, the county sheriff's SWAT team, and the FBI all to arrive on the scene with sirens blaring (Time, 19 June 2000, p. 31).

In the English language, in particular, we face the danger of miscommunicating with one another merely because of the nature of our language. Table 1 lists 22 examples of the same word whose meaning and pronunciation are completely different, depending on the circumstances. No wonder individuals from other cultures and languages have trouble communicating accurately in the United States.

Table 1 Inconsistent Pronunciations in the English Language

- ❑ We polish Polish furniture.
- ❑ He could lead if he would get the lead out.
- ❑ A farm can produce produce.
- ❑ The dump was so full it had to refuse refuse.
- ❑ The Iraqi soldiers decided to desert in the desert.
- ❑ The present is a good time to present the present.
- ❑ In the college band, a bass was painted on the head of a bass drum.
- ❑ The dove dove into the bushes.
- ❑ I did not object to that object.
- ❑ The insurance for the invalid was invalid.
- ❑ The bandage was wound around the wound.
- ❑ There was a row among the oarsmen about how to row.
- ❑ They were too close to the door to close it.
- ❑ The buck does funny things when the does are present.
- ❑ They sent a sewer down to stitch the tear in the sewer line.
- ❑ She shed a tear because of the tear in her skirt.
- ❑ To help with planting, the farmer taught his sow to sow.
- ❑ The wind was too strong to be able to wind the sail.
- ❑ After a number of Novocain injections, my jaw got number.
- ❑ I had to subject the subject to a series of tests.
- ❑ How can I intimate this to my most intimate friend?
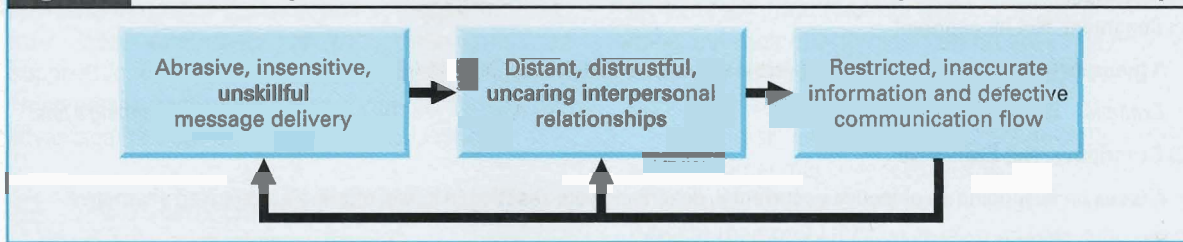- ❑ I spent last evening evening out a pile of dirt.

This does not account, of course, for the large number of variations in English-language meaning throughout the world. For example, because in England a billion is a million million, whereas in the United States and Canada a billion is a thousand million, it is easy to see how misunderstanding can occur regarding financial performance. Similarly, in an American meeting, if you "table" a subject, you postpone its discussion. In a British meeting, to "table" a topic means to discuss it now.

A Confucian proverb states: "Those who speak do not know. Those who know do not speak." It is not difficult to understand why Americans are often viewed as brash and unsophisticated in Asian cultures. A common problem for American business executives has been to announce, upon their return home, that a business deal has been struck, only to discover that no agreement was made at all. Usually, it is because Americans assume that when their Japanese colleagues say "hai," the Japanese word for "yes," it means agreement. To the Japanese, it often means "Yes, I am trying to understand you (but I may not necessarily agree with you)."

When accuracy is the primary consideration, attempts to improve communication generally center on improving the mechanics: transmitters and receivers, encoding and decoding, sources and destinations, and noise. Improvements in voice recognition software have made accuracy a key factor in electronic communication. One cardiologist friend, who always records his diagnoses via voice recognition software, completed a procedure to clear a patient's artery by installing a shunt (a small tube in the artery). He then reported in the patient's record: "The patient was shunted and is recovering nicely." The next time he checked the record, the software had recorded: "The patient was shot dead and is recovering nicely."

Fortunately, much progress has been made recently in improving the transmission of accurate messages—that is, in improving their clarity and precision. Primarily through the development of a sophisticated information-based technology, major strides have been taken to enhance communication speed and accuracy in organizations. Computer networks with multimedia capabilities now enable members of an organization to transmit messages, documents, video images, and sound almost anywhere in the world. The technology that enables modern companies to share, store, and retrieve information has dramatically changed the nature of business in just a decade. Customers and employees routinely expect information technology to function smoothly and the information it manages to be reliable. Sound decisions and competitive advantage depend on such accuracy.

| Abrasive, insensitive, **unskillful** message delivery | → | Distant, distrustful, uncaring interpersonal relationships | → | Restricted, inaccurate information and defective communication flow |

However, comparable progress has not occurred in the interpersonal aspects of communication. People still become offended at one another, make insulting statements, and communicate clumsily. The interpersonal aspects of communication involve the nature of the relationship between the communicators. Who says what to whom, what is said, why it is said, and how it is said all have an effect on the relationships between people. This has important implications for the effectiveness of the communication, aside from the accuracy of the statement. A statement Josiah Stamp made almost 100 years ago illustrates this point:

> *The government are [sic] very keen on amassing statistics. They collect them, add them, raise them to the nth power, take the cube root and prepare wonderful diagrams. But you must never forget that every one of these figures come in the first instance from the village watchman, who just puts down what he damn pleases.*

Similarly, irrespective of the availability of sophisticated information technologies and elaborately developed models of communication processes, individuals still communicate pretty much as they please—often in abrasive, insensitive, and unproductive ways. More often than not, it is the interpersonal aspect of communication that stands in the way of effective message delivery rather than the inability to deliver accurate information (Golen, 1990).

Ineffective communication may lead individuals to dislike each other, be offended by each other, lose confidence in each other, refuse to listen to each other, and disagree with each other, as well as cause a host of other interpersonal problems. These interpersonal problems, in turn, generally lead to restricted communication flow, inaccurate messages, and misinterpretations of meanings. Figure 1 summarizes this process.

To illustrate, consider the following situation. Latisha is introducing a new goal-setting program to the organization as a way to overcome some productivity problems. After Latisha's carefully prepared presentation in the management council meeting, Jose raises his hand. "In my opinion, this is a naive approach to solving our productivity issues. The considerations are much more complex than Latisha seems to realize. I don't think we should waste our time by pursuing this plan any further." Jose's opinion may be justified, but the manner in which he delivers the message will probably eliminate any hope of its being dealt with objectively. Instead, Latisha will probably hear a message such as, "You're naive," "You're stupid," or "You're incompetent." We wouldn't be surprised if Latisha's response was defensive or even hostile. Any good feelings between the two have probably been jeopardized, and their communication will probably be reduced to self-image protection. The merits of the proposal will be smothered by personal defensiveness. Future communication between the two will probably be minimal and superficial.

What Is Supportive Communication?

In this chapter, we focus on a kind of interpersonal communication that helps you communicate accurately and honestly without jeopardizing interpersonal relationships—namely, **supportive communication**. Supportive communication is communication that seeks to preserve a positive relationship between the communicators while still addressing the problem at hand. It allows you to provide negative feedback, or to resolve a difficult issue with another person and, as a result, strengthen your relationship.

Supportive communication has eight attributes, which are summarized in Table 2. Later in this chapter, we expand on each attribute. When supportive communication is used, not only is a message delivered accurately, but the relationship between the two communicating parties is supported, even enhanced, by the interchange. Positive interpersonal relationships result.

The goal of supportive communication is not merely to be liked by other people or to be judged to be a nice person, however. Nor is it used merely to

LEARNING

Table 2 — The Eight Attributes of Supportive Communication

❑ Congruent, Not Incongruent

A focus on honest messages in which verbal statements match thoughts and feelings.

Example: "Your behavior really upset me."	Not	"Do I seem upset? No, everything's fine."

❑ Descriptive, Not Evaluative

A focus on describing an objective occurrence, describing your reaction to it, and offering a suggested alternative.

Example: "Here is what happened; here is my reaction; here is a suggestion that would be more acceptable."	Not	"You are wrong for doing what you did."

❑ Problem Oriented, Not Person Oriented

A focus on problems and issues that can be changed rather than people and their characteristics.

Example: "How can we solve this problem?"	Not	"Because of you a problem exists."

❑ Validating, Not Invalidating

A focus on statements that communicate respect, flexibility, collaboration, and areas of agreement.

Example: "I have some ideas, but do you have any suggestions?"	Not	"You wouldn't understand, so we'll do it my way."

❑ Specific, Not Global

A focus on specific events or behaviors, avoiding general, extreme, or either-or statements.

Example: "You interrupted me three times during the meeting."	Not	"You're always trying to get attention."

❑ Conjunctive, Not Disjunctive

A focus on statements that flow from what has been said previously and facilitating interaction.

Example: "Relating to what you just said, I'd like to raise another point."	Not	"I want to say something (regardless of what you just said)."

❑ Owned, Not Disowned

A focus on taking responsibility for your own statements by using personal ("I") words.

Example: "I have decided to turn down your request because . . . "	Not	"You have a pretty good idea, but it wouldn't get approved."

❑ Supportive Listening, Not One-Way Listening

A focus on using a variety of appropriate responses, with a bias toward reflective responses.

Example: "What do you think are the obstacles standing in the way of improvement?"	Not	"As I said before, you make too many mistakes. You're just not performing."

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produce social acceptance. Positive interpersonal relationships have practical, instrumental value in organizations. Researchers have found, for example, that organizations fostering these kinds of relationships enjoy higher productivity, faster problem solving, higher-quality outputs, and fewer conflicts and subversive activities than do groups and organizations in which relationships are less positive (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Moreover, it is almost impossible to deliver outstanding customer service without supportive communication. Supportive communication skills are required to resolve customer complaints and misunderstandings.

Not only must managers be competent in using this kind of communication, therefore, but they must help their subordinates develop this competency as well.

One important lesson that American managers have been taught by foreign competitors is that good relationships among employees, and between managers and employees, produce bottom-line advantages (Peters, 1988, Sanchez & Dempsey, 2002; Ouchi, 1981; Pfeffer, 1998). Hanson (1986) found that the presence of good interpersonal relationships between managers and subordinates was three times more powerful in predicting profitability in 40 major corpora-

tions over a five-year period than the four next most powerful variables—market share, capital intensity, firm size, and sales growth rate—combined. Supportive communication, therefore, isn't just a "nice-person technique," but a proven competitive advantage for both managers and organizations.

Coaching and Counseling

The principles of supportive communication discussed in this chapter are best understood and most useful when they are applied to the interpersonal communication tasks commonly rated as the most challenging by managers: coaching and counseling subordinates. In coaching, managers pass along advice and information or set standards to help subordinates improve their work skills. In counseling, managers help subordinates recognize and address problems involving their state of mind, emotions, or personalities. Thus, coaching focuses on abilities, counseling on attitudes.

The skills of coaching and counseling also apply to a broad array of activities, of course, such as motivating others, handling customer complaints, passing critical or negative information upward, handling conflicts between other parties, negotiating for a certain position, and so on. However, coaching and counseling are almost universal managerial activities, and we will use them to illustrate and explain the behavioral principles involved.

Skillful coaching and counseling are especially important in (1) rewarding positive performance and (2) correcting problem behaviors or attitudes. Coaching and counseling are more difficult to implement effectively when employees are not performing up to expectations, when their attitudes are negative, when their behavior is disruptive, or when their personalities clash with others in the organization. Whenever managers have to help subordinates change their attitudes or behaviors, coaching or counseling is required. In these situations, managers face the responsibility of providing negative feedback to subordinates or getting them to recognize problems that they don't want to acknowledge. Managers must criticize and correct subordinates, but in a way that facilitates positive work outcomes, positive feelings, and positive relationships.

What makes coaching and counseling so challenging is the risk of offending or alienating subordinates. That risk is so high that many managers ignore completely the feelings and reactions of employees by taking a directive, hard-nosed, "shape up or ship out" approach. Or they soft-pedal, avoid confrontations, or drop hints for fear of hurting feelings and destroying relationships—the "don't worry, be happy" approach.

The principles we describe in this chapter not only facilitate accurate message delivery in sensitive situations, but their effective use can produce higher levels of motivation, increased productivity, and better interpersonal relationships.

Of course, coaching and counseling skills are also required when negative feedback is not involved, such as when subordinates ask for advice, need someone to listen to their problems, or want to register complaints. Sometimes just listening is the most effective form of coaching or counseling. Although the risk of damaged relationships, defensiveness, or hurt feelings is not as likely as when negative feedback is given, these situations still require competent communication skills. Guidelines for how to implement supportive communication effectively in both negative and positive coaching and counseling situations are discussed in the rest of this chapter.

To illustrate, consider the two following scenarios:

Jagdip Ahwal is the manager of the division sales force in your firm, which makes and sells components for the aerospace industry. He reports directly to you. Jagdip's division consistently misses its sales projections, its revenues per salesperson are below the firm average, and Jagdip's monthly reports are almost always late. You make another appointment to visit with Jagdip after getting the latest sales figures, but he isn't in his office when you arrive. His secretary tells you that one of Jagdip's sales managers dropped by a few minutes ago to complain that some employees are coming in late for work in the morning and taking extra-long coffee breaks. Jagdip had immediately gone with the manager to his sales department to give the salespeople a "pep talk" and to remind them of performance expectations. You wait for 15 minutes until he returns.

Betsy Christensen has an MBA from a prestigious Big Ten school and has recently joined your firm in the financial planning group. She came with great recommendations and credentials. However, she seems to be trying to enhance her own reputation at the expense of others in her group. You have heard increasing complaints lately that Betsy acts arrogant, is self-promotional, and is openly critical of other group members' work. In your first conversation with her about her performance in the group, she denied that there is a problem.

She said that, if anything, she was having a positive impact on the group by raising its standards. You schedule another meeting with Betsy after this latest set of complaints from her co-workers.

What are the basic problems in these two cases? Which one is primarily a coaching problem and which is primarily a counseling problem? How would you approach them so that the problems get solved and, at the same time, your relationships with your subordinates are strengthened? What would you say, and how would you say it, so that the best possible outcomes result? This chapter can help you improve your skill in handling such situations effectively.

COACHING AND COUNSELING PROBLEMS

The two cases above help identify the two basic kinds of interpersonal communication problems faced by managers. In the case with Jagdip Ahwal, the basic need is for **coaching**. Coaching situations are those in which managers must pass along advice and information or set standards for subordinates. Subordinates must be advised on how to do their jobs better and to be coached to better performance. Coaching problems are usually caused by lack of ability, insufficient information or understanding, or incompetence on the part of subordinates. In these cases, the accuracy of the information passed along by managers is important. The subordinate must understand clearly what the problem is and how to overcome it.

In the Jagdip Ahwal case, Jagdip was accepting upward delegation from his subordinates, and he was not allowing them to solve their own problems. By not insisting that his subordinates bring recommendations for solutions to him instead of problems, and by intervening directly in the problems of his subordinates' subordinates, Jagdip became overloaded himself. He didn't allow his subordinates to do their jobs. Productivity almost always suffers in cases in which one person is trying to resolve all the problems and run the whole show. Jagdip needs to be coached regarding how to avoid upward delegation and how to delegate responsibility as well as authority effectively.

The Betsy Christensen case illustrates a **counseling** problem. Managers need to counsel subordinates instead of coach them when the problem stems from attitudes, personality clashes, defensiveness, or other factors tied to emotions. Betsy's competency or skill is not a problem, but her unwillingness to recognize that a problem exists or that a change is needed on her part requires counseling by the manager. Betsy is highly qualified for her position, so coaching or giving advice would not be a useful approach. Instead, an important goal of counseling is to help Betsy recognize that a problem exists and to identify ways in which that problem might be addressed.

Coaching applies to ability problems, and the manager's approach is, "I can help you do this better." Counseling applies to attitude problems, and the manager's approach is, "I can help you recognize that a problem exists."

Although many problems involve both coaching and counseling, it is important to recognize the difference between these two types of problems because a mismatch of problem with communication approach can aggravate, rather than resolve, a problem. Giving direction or advice (coaching) in a counseling situation often increases defensiveness or resistance to change. Advising Betsy Christensen about how to do her job or about the things she should not be doing (such as criticizing others' work) will probably only magnify her defensiveness because she doesn't perceive that she has a problem. Similarly, counseling in a situation that calls for coaching simply sidesteps the problem and doesn't resolve it. Jagdip Ahwal knows that a problem exists, but he doesn't know how to resolve it. Coaching, not problem recognition, is needed.

The question that remains, however, is, "How do I effectively coach or counsel another person? What behavioral guidelines help me perform effectively in these situations?" Both coaching and counseling rely on the same set of key supportive communication principles summarized in Table 2, which we will now examine more closely.

DEFENSIVENESS AND DISCONFIRMATION

If principles of supportive communication are not followed when coaching or counseling subordinates, two major obstacles result that lead to a variety of negative outcomes (Brownell, 1986; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Gibb, 1961; Sieburg, 1978; Steil et al., 1983). These two obstacles are defensiveness and disconfirmation (Table 3).

Defensiveness is an emotional and physical state in which one is agitated, estranged, confused, and inclined to strike out (Gordon, 1988). Defensiveness arises when one of the parties feels threatened or punished by the communication. For that person, self-protection becomes more important than listening, so defensiveness blocks both the message and the interpersonal relationship. Clearly, a manager's coaching or

Table 3	Two Major Obstacles to Effective Interpersonal Communication

Supportive communication engenders feelings of support, understanding, and helpfulness. It helps overcome the two main obstacles resulting from poor interpersonal communication:

Defensiveness

- ❏ One individual feels threatened or attacked as a result of the communication.
- ❏ Self-protection becomes paramount.
- ❏ Energy is spent on constructing a defense rather than on listening.
- ❏ Aggression, anger, competitiveness, and avoidance are common reactions.

Disconfirmation

- ❏ One individual feels incompetent, unworthy, or insignificant as a result of the communication.
- ❏ Attempts to reestablish self-worth take precedence.
- ❏ Energy is spent trying to portray self-importance rather than on listening.
- ❏ Showing off, self-centered behavior, withdrawal, and loss of motivation are common reactions.

counseling will not be effective if it creates defensiveness in the other party. But defensive thinking may be pervasive and entrenched within an organization. Overcoming it calls for awareness by managers of their own defensiveness and vigorous efforts to apply the principles of supportive communication described in this chapter (Argyris, 2002).

The second obstacle, **disconfirmation**, occurs when one of the communicating parties feels put down, ineffectual, or insignificant because of the communication. Recipients of the communication feel that their self-worth is being questioned, so they focus more on building themselves up rather than listening. Reactions are often self-aggrandizing or show-off behaviors, loss of motivation, withdrawal, and loss of respect for the offending communicator.

The eight attributes of supportive communication, which we will explain and illustrate in the following pages, serve as behavioral guidelines for overcoming defensiveness and disconfirmation. Competent coaching and counseling depend on knowing and practicing these guidelines. They also depend on maintaining a balance among the guidelines, as we will illustrate.

Principles of Supportive Communication

1. Supportive communication is based on congruence, not incongruence.

Most researchers and observers agree that the best interpersonal communications, and the best relationships, are based on **congruence**. That is, what is communicated, verbally and nonverbally, matches exactly what the individual is thinking and feeling (Dyer, 1972; Hyman, 1989; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000; Rogers, 1961; Schnake et al., 1990).

Two kinds of **incongruence** are possible: One is a mismatch between what one is experiencing and what one is aware of. For example, an individual may not even be aware that he or she is experiencing anger or hostility toward another person, even though the anger or hostility is really present. In severe cases, therapists must help individuals reach greater congruence between experience and awareness. A second kind of incongruence, and the one more closely related to supportive communication, is a mismatch between what one thinks or feels and what one communicates. For example, an individual may be aware of a feeling of anger but will not say that the feeling exists.

When coaching and counseling subordinates, genuine, honest statements are always better than artificial or dishonest statements. Managers who hold back their true feelings or opinions, or who don't express what's really on their minds, create the impression that a hidden agenda exists. Subordinates sense that there is something else not being said, or that an opinion or thought is not being expressed. Therefore, they trust the communicator less and focus on trying to figure out what the hidden message is, not on listening or trying to improve. The relationship between the two communicators stays superficial and distrusting.

Stephen Covey introduced the concept of an "emotional bank account" in which individuals make deposits in an account that builds the relationship with

another person (Covey, 1990). These deposits help establish mutual trust and respect in the relationship. Similarly, communication cannot be genuinely supportive unless it is based on trust and respect and is also *perceived* as trusting and respectful. Otherwise, false impressions and miscommunication result. Congruence is a prerequisite of trust.

Rogers (1961: 344–345) suggests that congruence in communication lies at the heart of "a general law of interpersonal relationships":

> *The greater the congruence of experience, awareness, and communication on the part of one individual, the more the ensuing relationship will involve a tendency toward reciprocal communication with increasing congruence; a tendency toward more mutually accurate understanding of the communications; improved psychological adjustment and functioning in both parties; mutual satisfaction in the relationship.*
>
> *Conversely, the greater the communicated incongruence of experience and awareness, the more the ensuing relationship will involve further communication with the same quality; disintegration of accurate understanding; less adequate psychological adjustment and functioning in both parties; mutual dissatisfaction in the relationship.*

Congruence also relates to matching the content of the words spoken to the communicator's manner and tone of voice. "What a nice day" can mean the opposite if muttered sarcastically. "I'm just here to help" can mean the opposite if said without sincerity, especially if the history of the relationship suggests otherwise.

Striving for congruence, of course, does not mean that we should blow off steam immediately upon getting upset, nor does it mean that we cannot repress certain inappropriate feelings (e.g., keeping anger, disappointment, or aggression under wraps). Other principles of supportive communication must also be practiced, and achieving congruence at the expense of all other consideration is not productive. In problematic interactions, when reactive feedback must be given, individuals are more likely to express too little congruence than too much. This is because many people are afraid to respond in a completely honest way or are not sure how to communicate congruently without being offensive. It is often a matter of not knowing *how* to be congruent. Saying exactly what we feel, of course, can sometimes offend the other person.

Consider the problem of a subordinate who is not performing up to expectations and displays a nonchalant attitude even after having been given hints that the division's rating is being negatively affected. What could the superior say that would strengthen the relationship with the subordinate and still resolve the problem? How could you express honest feelings and opinions and still remain problem focused, not person focused? How can you ever be completely honest without offending another person? Other principles of supportive communication provide some guidelines.

2. Supportive communication is descriptive, not evaluative.

Evaluative communication makes a judgment or places a label on other individuals or on their behavior: "You are doing it wrong," or "You are incompetent." Such evaluation generally makes other people feel under attack and, consequently, respond defensively. They see the communicator as judgmental. Examples of probable responses are, "I am not doing it wrong," or "I am more capable than you are." Arguments, bad feelings, and a deterioration in the interpersonal relationship result.

The tendency to evaluate others is strongest when the issue is emotionally charged or when a person feels personally threatened. Sometimes people try to resolve their own bad feelings or anxieties by placing a label on others: "You are dumb" implies "I am smart," therefore, I feel better. They may have such strong feelings that they want to punish the other person for violating their expectations or standards: "What you have done deserves to be punished. You have it coming." Often, evaluations occur merely because people don't have any other alternatives in mind. They don't know how to be congruent without being judgmental or evaluating the other person.

The problem with evaluative communication is that it is likely to be self-perpetuating. Placing a label on someone else generally leads that person to place a label on you, which makes you defensive in return. When you are defensive and the other person is defensive, it's not hard to see why effective communication does not occur. Both the accuracy of the communication and quality of the relationship weaken. Arguments ensue.

An alternative to evaluation is **descriptive communication**. Because it is difficult to avoid evaluating other people without some alternative strategy, descriptive communication is designed to reduce the tendency to evaluate and to perpetuate a defensive

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interaction. It allows you to be congruent as well as being helpful. Descriptive communication involves three steps, summarized in Table 4.

First, *describe objectively your observation of the event that occurred or the behavior that you think needs to be modified.* Talk about what happened instead of the person involved. This description should identify elements of the behavior that could be confirmed by someone else. Behavior should be compared to accepted standards rather than to personal opinions or preferences. Subjective impressions or attributions to the motives of another person should be avoided. The description "You have finished fewer projects this month than anyone else in the division" can be confirmed by an objective record. It relates strictly to the behavior and to an objective standard, not to the motives or personal characteristics of the subordinate. There is less likelihood of the other person's feeling unfairly treated, since no evaluative label is placed on the behavior or the person. Describing a behavior, as opposed to evaluating a behavior, is relatively neutral, as long as the manager's manner is congruent with the message.

Second, *describe your (or others') reactions to the behavior or describe its consequences.* Rather than projecting onto another person the cause of the problem, focus on the reactions or consequences the behavior has produced. This requires that communicators be aware of their own reactions and are able to describe them. Using one-word descriptions for feel-

ings is often the best method: "I'm concerned about our productivity." "Your level of accomplishment frustrates me." Similarly, the consequences of the behavior can be pointed out: "Profits are off this month," "Department quality ratings are down," or "Two customers have called in to express dissatisfaction." Describing feelings or consequences also lessens the likelihood of defensiveness since the problem is framed in the context of the communicator's feelings or objective consequences, not the attributes of the subordinate. If those feelings or consequences are described in a nonaccusing way, the major energies of the communicators can be focused on problem solving rather than on defending against evaluations. That is, if *I* am concerned, *you* have less of a reason to feel defensive.

Third, *suggest a more acceptable alternative.* This focuses the discussion on the suggested alternative, not on the person. It also helps the other person save face and avoid feeling personally criticized because the individual is separated from the behavior. Self-esteem is preserved because it is something controllable, not the person, that should be modified. Of course, care should be taken not to give the message, "I don't like the way things are, so what are *you* going to do about it?" The change need not be the responsibility of only one of the communicating parties. Instead, the emphasis should be on finding a solution that is acceptable to both people, not on deciding who is right and who is wrong or who should change and who shouldn't (e.g., "I suggest that you identify what it would take to complete six

Table 4	Descriptive Communication
Step 1: Describe objectively the event, behavior, or circumstance.	
❑ Avoid accusations.	
❑ Present data or evidence.	
Example: Three clients have complained to me this month that you have not responded to their requests.	
Step 2: Focus on the behavior and your reaction, not on the other person's attributes.	
❑ Describe your reactions and feelings.	
❑ Describe the objective consequences that have resulted or will result.	
Example: I'm worried because each client has threatened to go elsewhere if we aren't more responsive.	
Step 3: Focus on solutions.	
❑ Avoid discussing who's right or wrong.	
❑ Suggest an acceptable alternative.	
❑ Be open to other alternatives.	
Example: We need both to win back their confidence and to show them you are responsive. I suggest you offer to do a free analysis of their systems.	

more projects than you did last month," or "I would like to help you identify the things that are standing in the way of higher performance").

One concern that is sometimes expressed regarding descriptive communication is that these steps may not work unless the other person knows the rules, too. We have heard people say that if both people know about supportive communication, it works; otherwise, the person who doesn't want to be supportive can subvert any positive result. For example, the other person might say, "I don't care how you feel," or "I have an excuse for what happened, so it's not my fault," or "It's too bad if this annoys you. I'm not going to change." How might you respond to these responses? Do you abandon principles of descriptive communication and become evaluative and defensive in return?

This display of lack of concern, or a defensive reaction, now becomes the priority problem. The problem of low performance will be very difficult to address as long as the more important interpersonal problem between these two people is blocking progress. In effect, the focus must shift from coaching to counseling, from focusing on ability to focusing on attitude. If the manager and the subordinate cannot work on the problem together, no amount of communication about the consequences of poor performance will be productive. Instead, the focus of the communication should be shifted to the lack of concern in the relationship, or the obstacles that inhibit working together to improve performance. Staying focused on the problem, remaining congruent, and using descriptive language become critical.

Effective managers do not abandon the three steps. They simply switch the focus. They might respond, "I'm surprised to hear you say that you don't care how I feel about this problem (step 1). Your response concerns me, and I think it might have important implications for the productivity of our team (step 2). I suggest we spend some time trying to identify the obstacles you feel might be inhibiting our ability to work together on this problem (step 3)."

It has been our experience that few individuals are completely recalcitrant about wanting to improve, and few are completely unwilling to work on problem solving when they believe that the communicator has their interests at heart. A common criticism of American managers, however, is that compared to their Asian competitors, many do not believe in these assumptions. They do not accept the fact that employees are "doing the best that they can" and that "people are motivated by opportunities for improvement." In Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars's (1998, 2000) terms, national cultures differ in the extent to which they focus on individual achievement ("I'll do what's best for me") versus the collective good ("I'm concerned about what is best for the group"). These are also similar to McGregor's (1960) Theory Y assumptions (e.g., individuals can be trusted to do what is right) as opposed to Theory X assumptions (e.g., individuals should be mistrusted since it takes threats of punishment to motivate change). In our experience, regardless of the national culture, most people want to do better, to perform successfully, and to be contributors. When managers use supportive communication principles not as manipulative devices but as genuine techniques to foster development and improvement, we have seldom found that people will not accept these genuine, congruent expressions. This applies to cultures all over the globe.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the steps of descriptive communication do not imply that one person should do all the changing. Frequently, a middle ground must be reached on which both individuals are satisfied (e.g., one person becomes more tolerant of deliberate work, and the other person becomes more conscious of trying to work faster). It is important to follow up coaching and counseling sessions with monitoring discussions. A subordinate's performance problems may stem from poor work habits developed over time. Such habits are not likely to change abruptly even if the coaching session goes especially well.

When it is necessary to make evaluative statements, the evaluations should be made in terms of some established criteria (e.g., "Your behavior does not meet the prescribed standard"), some probable outcomes (e.g., "Continuation of your behavior will lead to worse consequences"), or some past successes by the individual (e.g., "This behavior is not as good as your past behavior"). The important point is to avoid disconfirming the other person or arousing defensiveness.

3. *Supportive communication is problem oriented, not person oriented.*

Problem-oriented communication focuses on problems and solutions rather than on personal traits. Person-oriented communication focuses on the characteristics of the individual, not the event. "This is the problem" rather than "You are the problem" illustrates the difference between problem and person orientation. Problem-oriented communication is useful even when personal appraisals are called for because it focuses on

behaviors and events. Person-oriented communication, on the other hand, often focuses on things that cannot be changed or controlled, and it can send the message that the individual is inadequate.

Statements such as "You are dictatorial" and "You are insensitive" describe the person, while "I am being left out of decision making" and "We don't seem to see things the same way" describe problems. Imputing motives is person oriented ("It's because you want to control other people"), whereas describing overt behaviors is problem oriented ("You made several sarcastic comments in the meeting today").

One problem with person-oriented communication is that, while most people can change their behavior, few can change their basic personalities. Because nothing can generally be done to accommodate person-oriented communication, it leads to a deterioration in the relationship rather than to problem solving. Person-oriented messages often try to persuade the other individual that "this is how you should feel" or "this is what kind of person you are" (e.g., "You are an incompetent manager, a lazy worker, or an insensitive office mate"). But since most individuals accept themselves pretty much as they are, their common reaction to person-oriented communication is to defend themselves against it or reject it outright. Even when communication is positive (e.g., "You are a wonderful person"), it may not be viewed as trustworthy if it is not tied to a behavior or an accomplishment (e.g., "I think you are a terrific person because of the extra-mile service you rendered to our organization"). The absence of a meaningful referent is the key weakness in person-oriented communication.

In coaching and counseling, problem-oriented communication should also be linked to accepted standards or expectations rather than to personal opinions. Personal opinions are more likely to be interpreted as person oriented and arouse defensiveness than statements in which the behavior is compared to an accepted standard or performance. For example, the statement, "I don't like the way you dress" is an expression of a personal opinion and will probably create resistance, especially if the listener does not feel that the communicator's opinions are any more legitimate than his or her own. "Your dress is not in keeping with the company dress code," or "In this firm, everyone is expected to wear a tie to work," are comparisons to external standards that have some legitimacy. Feelings of defensiveness are less likely to arise because the problem, not the person, is being addressed. In addition, other people are more likely to support a statement based on a commonly accepted standard.

Supportive communicators need not avoid expressing personal opinions or feelings about the behavior or attitudes of others. But when doing so, they should keep in mind the following additional principles.

4. Supportive communication validates rather than invalidates individuals.

Validating communication helps people feel recognized, understood, accepted, and valued. Communication that is **invalidating** arouses negative feelings about self-worth, identity, and relatedness to others. It denies the presence, uniqueness, or importance of other individuals. Especially important are communications that invalidate people by conveying superiority, rigidity, indifference, and imperviousness (Brownell, 1986; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994; Sieburg, 1978; Steil et al., 1983). Barnlund's (1968: 618) observation more than a quarter-century ago is even more true today:

> *People often do not take time, do not listen, do not try to understand, but interrupt, anticipate, criticize, or disregard what is said; in their own remarks they are frequently vague, inconsistent, verbose, insincere, or dogmatic. As a result, people often conclude conversations feeling more inadequate, more misunderstood, and more alienated than when they started.*

Communication that is superiority oriented gives the impression that the communicator is informed while others are ignorant, adequate while others are inadequate, competent while others are incompetent, or powerful while others are impotent. It creates a barrier between the communicator and those to whom the message is sent.

Superiority-oriented communication can take the form of put-downs, in which others are made to look bad so that the communicator looks good, or it can take the form of "one-upmanship," in which the communicator tries to elevate himself or herself in the esteem of others. One form of one-upmanship is withholding information, either boastfully ("If you know what I know, you would feel differently") or coyly to trip people up ("If you had asked me, I could have told you the executive committee would disapprove of your proposal"). Boasting almost always makes others uncomfortable, mainly because it is designed to convey superiority.

Another common form of superiority-oriented communication is the use of jargon, acronyms, or

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words used in such a way as to exclude others or to create barriers in a relationship. Doctors, lawyers, government employees, and many professionals are well known for their use of jargon or acronyms, designed to exclude others or to elevate themselves rather than to clarify a message. Speaking a foreign language in the presence of individuals who don't understand it may also be done to create the impression of superiority. In most circumstances, using words or language that a listener can't understand is bad manners because it invalidates the other person.

Rigidity in communication is the second major type of invalidation: The communication is portrayed as absolute, unequivocal, or unquestionable. No other opinion or point of view could possibly be considered. Individuals who communicate in dogmatic, "know-it-all" ways often do so in order to minimize others' contributions or to invalidate others' perspectives. It is possible to communicate rigidity, however, in ways other than just being dogmatic. Rigidity is also communicated by:

- Reinterpreting all other viewpoints to conform to one's own.
- Never saying "I don't know," but having an answer for everything.
- Appearing unwilling to tolerate criticisms or alternative points of view.
- Reducing complex issues to simplistic definitions or generalizations.
- Placing exclamation points after statements so the impression is created that the statement is final, complete, or unqualified.

Indifference is communicated when the other person's existence or importance is not acknowledged. A person may do this by using silence, by making no verbal response to the other's statements, by avoiding eye contact or any facial expression, by interrupting the other person frequently, by using impersonal words ("one should not" instead of "you should not"), or by engaging in unrelated activity during a conversation. The communicator appears not to care about the other person and gives the impression of being impervious to the other person's feelings or perspectives. To be indifferent is to exclude others, to treat them as if they are not even present.

Imperviousness means that the communicator does not acknowledge the feelings or opinions of the other person. They are either labeled illegitimate—"You shouldn't feel that way" or "Your opinion is

incorrect"—or they are labeled as ignorant—"You don't understand," "You just don't get it," or (worse yet) "Your opinion is naive." Being impervious means to ignore or make unimportant the personal feelings or thoughts of another. It serves to exclude the other person's contribution to the conversation or the relationship, and it makes the other person feel illegitimate or unimportant.

Communication is invalidating when it denies the other person an opportunity to establish a mutually satisfying relationship or when contributions cannot be made by both parties. When one person doesn't allow the other to finish a sentence, adopts a competitive, win-or-lose stance, sends confusing messages, or disqualifies the other person from making a contribution, communication is invalidating and, therefore, dysfunctional for effective problem solving.

Invalidation is even more destructive in coaching and counseling than criticism or disagreement because criticism and disagreement validate the other person by recognizing that what was said or done is worthy of correction, response, or notice. As William James (1965) stated, "No more fiendish punishment could be devised, even were such a thing physically possible, than that one could be turned loose in a society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof."

Validating communication, on the other hand, helps people feel recognized, understood, accepted, and valued. It has four attributes: It is *egalitarian, flexible, two-way,* and *based on agreement.*

Respectful, egalitarian communication (the opposite of superiority-oriented communication) is especially important when a person with a higher status interacts with a person of a lower status. When a hierarchical distinction exists between coaches or counselors and subordinates, for example, it is easy for subordinates to feel invalidated since they have access to less power and information than their managers. Supportive communicators, however, help subordinates feel that they have a stake in identifying problems and resolving them by communicating an egalitarian stance. They treat subordinates as worthwhile, competent, and insightful and emphasize joint problem solving rather than projecting a superior position. They can do this merely by asking for opinions, suggestions, and ideas. Another way they do this is by using flexible (rather than rigid) statements.

Flexibility in communication is the willingness of the manager to communicate an understanding that the subordinate may possess additional data and other alternatives that may make significant contributions both to the problem solution and to the relationship. It

means communicating genuine humility—not self-abasement or weakness, but a willingness to learn and to be open to new experience. It means remaining open to new insight. As Benjamin Disraeli noted, "To be conscious that you are ignorant is a first great step toward knowledge."

Perceptions and opinions are not presented as facts in flexible communication, but are stated provisionally. No claim is made for the truthfulness of opinions or assumptions. Rather, they are identified as being changeable if more data should become available. Flexible communication conveys a willingness to enter into joint problem solving rather than to control the other person or to assume a master–teacher role. However, being flexible is not synonymous with being wishy-washy. "Gee, I can't make up my mind" is wishy-washy, whereas "I have my own opinions, but what do you think?" suggests flexibility.

Two-way communication is an implied result of respectfulness and flexibility. Individuals feel validated when they are asked questions, given "air time" to express their opinions, and encouraged to participate actively in the coaching and counseling process. Two-way interchange communicates the message that subordinates are valued by the manager and that coaching and counseling are best accomplished in an atmosphere of collaboration and teamwork.

Finally, the manager's communication validates the subordinate when it *identifies areas of agreement* and joint commitment. One way to express validation based on agreement is to identify positive behaviors and positive attitudes as well as negative ones during the process of coaching and counseling. The manager should point out important points made by the subordinate before pointing out trivial ones, areas of agreement before areas of disagreement, advantages of the subordinate's statements before disadvantages, compliments before criticisms, and positive next steps before past mistakes. The point is, validating other people helps create feelings of self-worth and self-confidence that can translate into self-motivation and improved performance. Invalidation seldom produces such positive outcomes, yet it is a common form of management response to subordinates.

5. Supportive communication is specific (useful), not global (nonuseful).

Specific statements are supportive because they identify something that can be easily understood and acted upon. In general, the more specific a statement is, the more effective it is in motivating improvement. For example, the statement "You have trouble managing your time" is too general to be useful, whereas "You spent an hour scheduling meetings today when that could have been done by your assistant" provides specific information that can serve as a basis for behavioral change. "Your communication needs to improve" is not nearly as useful as a more specific "In this role play, you used evaluative statements 60 percent of the time and descriptive statements 10 percent of the time."

Specific statements avoid extremes and absolutes. The following are extreme (global) statements that lead to defensiveness or disconfirmation:

A: "You never ask for my advice."
B: "Yes, I do. I always consult you before making a decision."
A: "You have no consideration for others' feelings."
B: "I do so. I am always considerate."
A: "This job stinks."
B: "You're wrong. It's a great job."

Another common type of global communication is the either–or statement, such as "You either do what I say or I'll fire you," "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing" (Helen Keller), and "If America doesn't reduce its national debt, our children will never achieve the standard of living we enjoy today."

The problem with extreme and either–or statements is that they deny any alternatives. The possible responses of the recipient of the communication are severely constrained. To contradict or deny the statement generally leads to defensiveness and arguments. A statement by Adolf Hitler in 1933 illustrates the point: "Everyone in Germany is a National Socialist; the few outside the party are either lunatics or idiots." A friend of ours was asked to serve as a consultant to a labor and management committee. As he entered the room and was introduced as a professor, the union president declared: "Either he goes or I go."

What would you do? How would you use supportive communication when the union president has made a global statement that either excludes you or cancels the negotiations? Our friend's reply was, "I hope there are more alternatives than that. Why don't we explore them?"

Specific statements are more useful in coaching and counseling because they focus on behavioral events and indicate gradations in positions. More useful forms of the examples above are the following:

A: "You made that decision yesterday without asking for my advice."

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B: *"Yes, I did. While I generally like to get your opinion, I didn't think it was necessary in this case."*

A: *"By using sarcasm in your response to my request, you gave me the impression you don't care about my feelings."*

B: *"I'm sorry. I know I am often sarcastic without thinking how it affects others."*

A: *"The pressure to meet deadlines affects the quality of my work."*

B: *"Since deadlines are part of our work, let's discuss ways to manage the pressure."*

Specific statements may not be useful if they focus on things over which another person has no control. "I hate it when it rains," for example, may relieve some personal frustration, but nothing can be done to change the weather. Similarly, communicating the message (even implicitly) "The sound of your voice (or your personality, your weight, your tastes, the way you are, etc.) bothers me" only proves frustrating for the interacting individuals. Such a statement is usually interpreted as a personal attack. The reaction is likely to be, "What can I do about that?" or "I don't even understand what you mean." Specific communication is useful to the extent that it focuses on an identifiable problem or behavior about which something can be done (e.g., "It bothers me when you talk so loudly in the library that it disturbs others' concentration").

6. Supportive communication is conjunctive, not disjunctive.

Conjunctive communication is joined to previous messages in some way. It flows smoothly. **Disjunctive communication** is disconnected from what was stated before.

Communication can become disjunctive in at least three ways. First, there can be a lack of equal opportunity to speak. When one person interrupts another, when someone dominates by controlling "air time," or when two or more people try to speak at the same time, the communication is disjunctive. The transitions between exchanges do not flow smoothly. A smooth transition does not occur between one statement and the next. Second, extended pauses are disjunctive. When speakers pause for long periods in the middle of their speeches or when there are long pauses before responses, the communication is disjunctive. Pauses need not be total silence; the space may be
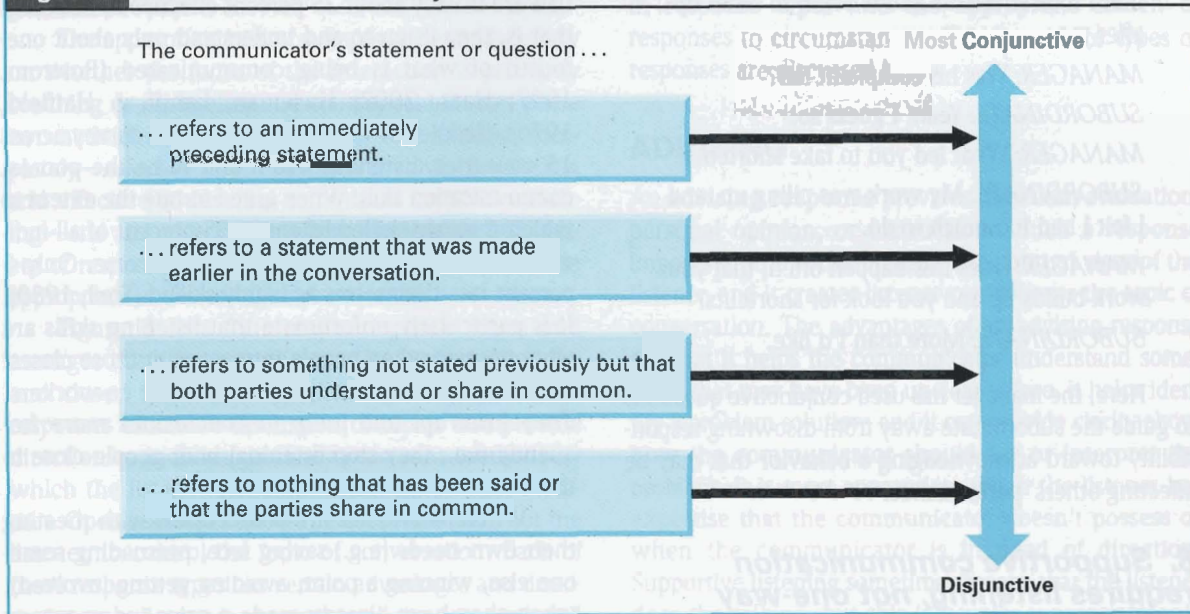
filled with "umm," "aaah," or a repetition of something stated earlier, but the communication does not progress. Third, topic control can be disjointed. When one person decides unilaterally what the next topic of conversation will be (as opposed to having it decided bilaterally), the communication is disjunctive. Individuals may switch topics, for example, with no reference to what was just said, or they may control the other person's communication topic by directing what should be responded to. Sieburg (1969) found that more than 25 percent of the statements made in small-group discussions failed to refer to or even acknowledge prior speakers or their statements.

These three factors—taking turns speaking, management of timing, and topic control—contribute to what Wiemann (1977) called *interaction management*. They have been found to be crucial in supportive communication. In an empirical study of perceived communication competence, Wiemann (1977: 104) found that "the smoother the management of the interaction, the more competent the communicator was perceived to be." People who took turns, who did not dominate with pauses or excessive air time, and who connected what they said to what others had said in the past were judged as competent communicators. In fact, interaction management was concluded to be the most powerful determinant of perceived communication competence in his experimental study. Individuals who used conjunctive communication were rated as being significantly more competent in interpersonal communication than were those whose communication was disjunctive.

This suggests that skilled coaches and counselors use several kinds of behaviors in managing communication situations so they are conjunctive rather than disjunctive. For example, they foster conjunctive communication in an interaction by asking questions that are based directly on the subordinate's previous statement, by waiting for a sentence to be completed before beginning a response (e.g., not finishing a sentence for someone else), and by saying only three or four sentences at a time before pausing to give the other person a chance to add input. In addition, they avoid long pauses; their statements refer to what has been said before; and they take turns speaking. Figure 2 illustrates the continuum of conjunctive and disjunctive statements.

By using conjunctive communication, managers confirm the worth of the other person's statements, thereby helping to foster joint problem solving and teamwork.

Figure 2 The Continuum of Conjunctive Statements

The communicator's statement or question...

Conjunctive

... refers to an immediately preceding statement.

... refers to a statement that was made earlier in the conversation.

... refers to something not stated previously but that both parties understand or share in common.

... refers to nothing that has been said or that the parties share in common.

Disjunctive

7. Supportive communication is owned, not disowned.

Taking responsibility for one's statements and acknowledging that the source of the ideas is oneself and not another person or group is **owning communication**. Using first-person words, such as "I," "me," "mine," indicates owning communication. **Disowning communication** is suggested by use of third-person or first-person-plural words: "We think," "They said," or "One might say." Disowned communication is attributed to an unknown person, group, or to some external source (e.g., "Lots of people think"). The communicator avoids taking responsibility for the message and therefore avoids investing in the interaction. This may convey the message that the communicator is aloof or uncaring about the receiver or is not confident enough in the ideas expressed to take responsibility for them.

Glasser (1965, 2000) based his approach to mental health—reality therapy—on the concept of taking responsibility for, or owning, communication and behavior. According to Glasser, people's mental health depends on their accepting responsibility for their statements and behaviors. The basic assumption of reality therapy is that taking responsibility for your own communication builds self-confidence and a sense of self-worth. The opposite, attributing what one feels or says to someone or something else (e.g., "My being cranky isn't my fault because my roommate stays up all night

playing loud music") leads to poor mental health and loss of self-control. Ownership and responsibility are keys to personal growth and to trusting and effective interpersonal relationships. You will trust me more if you know that I take responsibility for my statements

One result of disowned communication is that the listener is never sure whose point of view the message represents: "How can I respond if I don't know to whom I am responding?" "If I don't understand the message, whom can I ask since the message represents someone else's point of view?" Moreover, an implicit message associated with disowned communication is, "I want to keep distance between you and me." The speaker communicates as a representative rather than as a person, as a message conveyer rather than an interested individual. Owned communication, however, indicates a willingness to invest oneself in a relationship and to act as a colleague or helper.

This last point suggests that coaches or counselors should encourage others to own their own statements. This can be done by example but also by asking the other person to restate disowning statements, as in this exchange:

SUBORDINATE: Everyone else says my work is fine.

MANAGER: So no one besides me has ever expressed dissatisfaction with your work or suggested how to improve it?

SUBORDINATE: Well . . . Mark complained that I took shortcuts and left him to clean up after me.

MANAGER: Was his complaint fair?

SUBORDINATE: Yeah, I guess so.

MANAGER: What led you to take shortcuts?

SUBORDINATE: My work was piling up, and I felt I had too much to do.

MANAGER: Does this happen often, that your work builds up and you look for shortcuts?

SUBORDINATE: More than I'd like.

Here, the manager has used conjunctive questions to guide the subordinate away from disowning responsibility toward acknowledging a behavior that may be affecting others' performance.

8. Supportive communication requires listening, not one-way message delivery.

The previous seven attributes of supportive communication all focus on message delivery, where a message is initiated by the coach or counselor. But another aspect of supportive communication—that is, *listening and responding* effectively to someone else's statements—is at least as important as delivering supportive messages. As Maier, Solem, and Maier (1973: 311) stated: "In any conversation, the person who talks the most is the one who learns the least about the other person. The good supervisor therefore must become a good listener."

Haas and Arnold (1995) found that in the workplace, about one-third of the characteristics people use to judge communication competence have to do with listening. Kramer (1997) found that good listening skills accounted for 40 percent of the variance in effective leadership. In short, good listeners are more likely to be perceived as skillful communicators. In fact, people who are judged to be the most "wise," or to possess the attribute of wisdom—and, therefore, are the most sought-after people with whom to interact—are also the best listeners (Kramer, 2000; Sternberg, 1990).

In a survey of personnel directors in 300 businesses and industries conducted to determine what skills are most important in becoming a manager, Crocker (1978) reported that effective listening was ranked highest. Despite its importance in managerial success, however, and despite the fact that most people spend at least 45 percent of their communication time listening, most of us have underdeveloped listening skills. Tests have shown, for example, that individuals are usually about 25 percent effective in listening, that is, they listen to and understand only about one-fourth of what is being communicated (Bostrom, 1997; Haas, 2002; Huseman, Lahiff, & Hatfield, 1976). Geddie (1999) reported that in a survey across 15 countries, listening was found to be the poorest communication skill. When asked to rate the extent to which they are skilled listeners, 85 percent of all individuals rate themselves as average or worse. Only 5 percent rate themselves as highly skilled (Steil, 1980). It is particularly unfortunate that listening skills are often poorest when people interact with those closest to them, such as family members and co-workers. They interrupt and jump to conclusions more frequently (i.e., they stop listening) with people close to them than with others.

When individuals are preoccupied with meeting their own needs (e.g., saving face, persuading someone else, winning a point, avoiding getting involved), when they have already made a prior judgment, or when they hold negative attitudes toward the communicator or the message, they don't listen effectively. Because a person listens at the rate of 500 words a minute but speaks at a normal rate of only 125 to 250 words a minute, the listener's mind can dwell on other things half the time. Therefore, being a good listener is neither easy nor automatic. It requires developing the ability to hear and understand the message sent by another person, while at the same time helping to strengthen the relationship between the interacting parties.

Rogers and Farson (1976: 99) suggest that this kind of listening conveys the idea that:

> *I'm interested in you as a person, and I think what you feel is important. I respect your thoughts, and even if I don't agree with them, I know they are valid for you. I feel sure you have a contribution to make. I think you're worth listening to, and I want you to know that I'm the kind of person you can talk to.*

People do not know they are being listened to unless the listener makes some type of response. This can be simple eye contact and nonverbal responsiveness such as smiles, nods, and focused attention. However, competent managers who must coach and counsel also select carefully from a repertoire of verbal response alternatives that clarify the communication as well as strengthen the interpersonal relationship. The mark of a supportive listener is the competence to

select appropriate responses to others' statements (Bostrom, 1997).

The appropriateness of a response depends largely on whether the focus of the interaction is primarily coaching or counseling. Of course, seldom can these two activities be separated from one another completely—effective coaching often involves counseling and effective counseling sometimes involves coaching—and attentive listening involves the use of a variety of responses. Some responses, however, are more appropriate under certain circumstances than others.

Figure 3 lists four major response types and arranges them on a continuum from most directive and closed to most nondirective and open. Closed responses eliminate discussion of topics and provide direction to individuals. They represent methods by which the listener can control the topic of conversation. Open responses allow the communicator, not the listener, to control the topic of conversation. Each of these response types has certain advantages and disadvantages, and none is appropriate all the time under all circumstances.
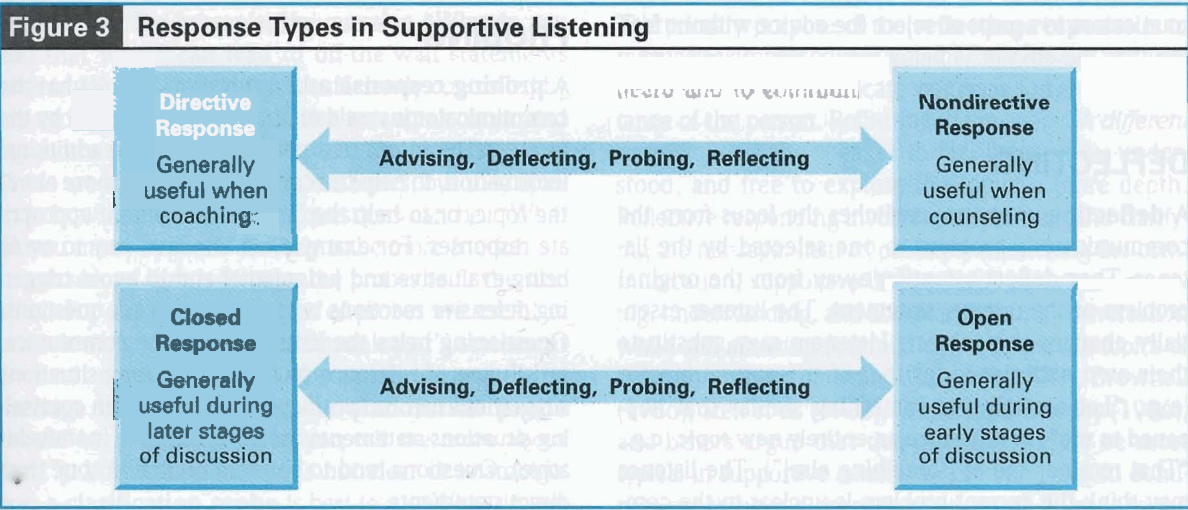
Most people get in the habit of relying heavily on one or two response types, and they use them regardless of the circumstances. Moreover, most people have been found to rely first and foremost on evaluative or judgmental responses (Bostrom, 1997; Rogers, 196 That is, when they encounter another person's statements, most people tend to agree or disagree, to pass judgment, or to immediately form a personal opinion about the legitimacy or veracity of the statement. On the average, about 80 percent of most people's responses have been found to be evaluative. Supportive listening, however, avoids evaluation and judg-

ment as a first response. Instead, it relies on flexibility in response types and the appropriate match of responses to circumstances. The four major types of responses are discussed below.

ADVISING

An **advising response** provides direction, evaluation, personal opinion, or instructions. Such a response imposes on the communicator the point of view of the listener, and it creates listener control over the topic of conversation. The advantages of an advising response are that it helps the communicator understand something that may have been unclear before, it helps identify a problem solution, and it can provide clarity about how the communicator should act or interpret the problem. It is most appropriate when the listener has expertise that the communicator doesn't possess or when the communicator is in need of direction. Supportive listening sometimes means that the listener does the talking, but this is usually appropriate only when advice or direction is specifically requested. Most listeners have a tendency to offer much more advice and direction than is appropriate.

One problem with advising is that it can produce dependence. Individuals get used to having someone else generate answers, directions, or clarifications. They are not permitted to figure out issues and solutions for themselves. A second problem is that advising also creates the impression that the communicator is not being understood by the listener. Rogers (1961) found that most people, even when they seem to be asking for advice, mainly desire understanding and acceptance, not advice. They want the listener to share

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Figure 3	Response Types in Supportive Listening

Directive Response		Nondirective Response
Generally useful when coaching	Advising, Deflecting, Probing, Reflecting	Generally useful when counseling
Closed Response		Open Response
Generally useful during later stages of discussion	Advising, Deflecting, Probing, Reflecting	Generally useful during early stages of discussion

in the communication but not take charge of it. The problem with advising is that it removes from the communicator the opportunity to stay focused on the issue that is on the communicator's mind. Advice shifts the control of the conversation away from the communicator. A third problem with advising is that it shifts focus from the communicator's issue to the listener's advice. When listeners feel that advising is appropriate, they concentrate more on the legitimacy of the advice or on the generation of alternatives and solutions than on simply listening attentively. When listeners are expected to generate advice and direction, they may focus more on their own experience than on the communicator's experience, or on formulating their advice more than on the nuances of the communicator's message. It is difficult to simultaneously be a good listener and a good adviser. A fourth potential problem with advising is that it can imply that communicators don't have the necessary understanding, expertise, insight, or maturity, so they need help because of their incompetence.

One way to overcome the disadvantages of advising in coaching and counseling is to avoid giving advice as a first response. Almost always, advising should follow other responses that allow communicators to have control over the topics of conversation, that show understanding and acceptance, and that encourage analysis and self-reliance on the part of communicators. In addition, advice should either be connected to an accepted standard or should be tentative. An accepted standard means that communicators and listeners both acknowledge that the advice will lead to a desired outcome and that it is inherently good, right, or appropriate. When this is impossible, the advice should be communicated as the listener's opinion or feeling, and as only one option (i.e., with flexibility), not as the only option. This permits communicators to accept or reject the advice without feeling that the advisor is being invalidated or rejected if the advice is not accepted.

DEFLECTING

A **deflecting response** switches the focus from the communicator's problem to one selected by the listener. They deflect attention away from the original problem or the original statement. The listener essentially changes the subject. Listeners may substitute their own experience for that of the communicator (e.g., "Let me tell you something similar that happened to me") or introduce an entirely new topic (e.g., "That reminds me of [something else]"). The listener may think the current problem is unclear to the communicator and that the use of examples or analogies will help. Or the listener may feel that the communicator needs to be reassured that others have experienced the same problem and that support and understanding are available.

Deflecting responses are most appropriate when a comparison or some reassurance is needed. They can provide empathy and support by communicating the message "I understand because of what happened to me (or someone else)." They can also convey the assurance "Things will be fine. Others have also had this experience." Deflection is also often used to avoid embarrassing either the communicator or the listener. Changing the subject when either party gets uncomfortable and answering a question other than the one asked are common examples.

The disadvantages of deflecting responses are that they can imply that the communicator's message is not important or that the experience of the listener is more significant than that of the communicator. They may produce competitiveness or feelings of being one-upped by the listener. Deflection can be interpreted as, "My experience is more worthy of discussion than yours." Or it may simply change the subject from something that is important and central to the communicator to a topic that is not as important.

Deflecting responses are most effective when they are conjunctive—when they are clearly connected to what the communicator just said, when the listener's response leads directly back to the communicator's concerns, and when the reason for the deflection is made clear. That is, deflecting can produce desirable outcomes in coaching and counseling if the communicator feels supported and understood, not invalidated, by the change in topic focus.

PROBING

A **probing response** asks a question about what the communicator just said or about a topic selected by the listener. The intent of a probe is to acquire additional information, to help the communicator say more about the topic, or to help the listener foster more appropriate responses. For example, an effective way to avoid being evaluative and judgmental and to avoid triggering defensive reactions is to continue to ask questions. Questioning helps the listener adopt the communicator's frame of reference so that in coaching situations suggestions can be specific (not global) and in counseling situations statements can be descriptive (not evaluative). Questions tend to be more neutral in tone than direct statements.

Table 5	**Four Types of Probing Responses**
TYPE OF PROBE	**EXPLANATION**
Elaboration probe	Use when more information is needed. ("Can you tell me more about that?")
Clarification probe	Use when the message is unclear or ambiguous. ("What do you mean by that?")
Repetition probe	Use when topic drift occurs or statements are unclear. ("Once again, what do you think about this?")
Reflection probe	Use to encourage more in-depth pursuit of the same topic. ("You say you are having difficulty?")

Questioning, however, can sometimes have the unwelcome effect of switching the focus of attention from the communicator's statement to the reasons behind it. The question "Why do you think that way?" might pressure the communicator to justify a feeling or a perception rather than just report it. Similarly, probing responses can serve as a mechanism for escaping discussion of a topic or for maneuvering the topic around to one the listener wants to discuss (e.g., "Instead of discussing your feelings about your job, tell me why you didn't respond to my memo"). Probing responses can also allow the communicator to lose control of the conversation, especially when difficult subjects need to be addressed (e.g., "Why aren't you performing up to your potential?" allows all kinds of other issues to be raised that may or may not be apropos).

Two important hints should be kept in mind to make probing responses more effective. One is that "why" questions are seldom as effective as "what" questions. "Why" questions lead to topic changes, escapes, and speculations more often than to valid information. For example, the question "Why do you feel that way?" can lead to off-the-wall statements such as "Because my id is not sufficiently controlled by my ego," or "Because my father was an alcoholic and my mother beat me," or "Because Dr. Laura said so." These are extreme, even silly, examples, but they illustrate how ineffective "why" questions can be. "What do you mean by that?" is likely to be more fruitful.

A second hint is to tailor the probes to fit the situation. For example, four types of probes are useful in interviewing. When the communicator's statement does not contain enough information, or part of the message is not understood, an **elaboration probe** should be used (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that?"). When the message is not clear or is ambiguous, a **clarification probe** is best (e.g., "What do you

mean by that?"). A **repetition probe** works best when the communicator is avoiding a topic, has not answered a previous question, or a previous statement is unclear (e.g., "Once again, what do you think about this?"). A **reflection probe** is most effective when the communicator is being encouraged to keep pursuing the same topic in greater depth (e.g., "You say you are discouraged?"). Table 5 summarizes these four kinds of questions or probes.

Probing responses are especially effective in turning hostile or conflictive conversations into supportive conversations. Asking questions can often turn attacks into consensus, evaluations into descriptions, general statements into specific statements, disowning statements into owning statements, or person-focused declarations into problem-focused declarations. In other words, probes can often be used to help others use supportive communication when they have not been trained in advance to do so.

REFLECTING

The primary purpose of the **reflecting response** is to mirror back to the communicator the message that was heard and to communicate understanding and acceptance of the person. Reflecting the message *in different words* allows the speaker to feel listened to, understood, and free to explore the topic in more depth. Reflective responding involves paraphrasing and clarifying the message. Instead of simply mimicking the communication, supportive listeners also contribute meaning, understanding, and acceptance to the conversation while still allowing communicators to pursue topics of their choosing. Athos and Gabarro (1978), Brownell (1986), Steil et al. (1983), Wolvin and Coakley (1996), and others argue that this response should be most typical in supportive communication and should dominate coaching and counseling situations. It leads to the

clearest communication, the most two-way exchanges, and the most supportive relationships. For example:

> SUPERVISOR: Jerry, I'd like to hear about any problems you've been having with your job over the last several weeks.
>
> SUBORDINATE: Don't you think they ought to do something about the air conditioning in the office? It gets to be like an oven in here every afternoon! They said they were going to fix the system weeks ago!
>
> SUPERVISOR: It sounds like the delay is really beginning to make you angry.
>
> SUBORDINATE: It sure is! It's just terrible the way maintenance seems to be goofing off instead of being responsive.
>
> SUPERVISOR: So it's frustrating . . . and discouraging.
>
> SUBORDINATE: Amen. And by the way, there's something else I want to mention. . . .

A potential disadvantage of reflective responses is that communicators can get an impression opposite from the one intended; that is, they can get the feeling that they are not being understood or listened to carefully. If they keep hearing reflections of what they just said, their response might be, "I just said that. Aren't you listening to me?" Reflective responses, in other words, can be perceived as an artificial "technique" or as a superficial response to a message.

The most effective listeners keep the following rules in mind when using reflective responses.

1. Avoid repeating the same response over and over, such as "You feel that . . . ," "Are you saying that . . . ?" or "What I heard you say was. . . ."
2. Avoid mimicking the communicator's words. Instead, restate what you just heard in a way that helps ensure that you understand the message and the communicator knows that you understand.
3. Avoid an exchange in which listeners do not contribute equally to the conversation, but serve only as mimics. (One can use understanding or reflective responses while still taking equal responsibility for the depth and meaning of the communication.)
4. Respond to the personal rather than the impersonal. For example, to a complaint by a subordinate about close supervision and feelings of

incompetence and annoyance, a reflective response would focus on personal feelings before supervision style.
5. Respond to expressed feelings before responding to content. When a person expresses feelings, they are the most important part of the message. They may stand in the way of the ability to communicate clearly unless acknowledged.
6. Respond with empathy and acceptance. Avoid the extremes of complete objectivity, detachment, or distance on the one hand, or over-identification (accepting the feelings as one's own) on the other.
7. Avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with the statements. Use reflective listening and other listening responses to help the communicator explore and analyze the problem. Later, you can draw on this information to help fashion a solution.

The Personal Management Interview

Not only are the eight attributes of supportive communication effective in normal discourse and problem-solving situations, but they can be most effectively applied when specific interactions with subordinates are planned and conducted frequently. One important difference between effective and ineffective managers is the extent to which they provide their subordinates with opportunities to receive regular feedback, to feel supported and bolstered, and to be coached and counseled. It is difficult to provide these opportunities, however, because of the tremendous time demands most managers face. Many managers want to coach, counsel, and train subordinates, but they simply never find the time. Therefore, one important mechanism for applying supportive communication and for providing subordinates with development and feedback opportunities is to implement a **personal management interview program**.

A personal management interview program is a regularly scheduled, one-on-one meeting between a manager and his or her subordinates. In a study of the performance of working departments and intact teams in a variety of organizations, Boss (1983) found that effectiveness increased significantly when managers conducted regular, private meetings with subordinates on a biweekly or monthly basis. In a study of health care organizations holding these regular personal management interviews compared to
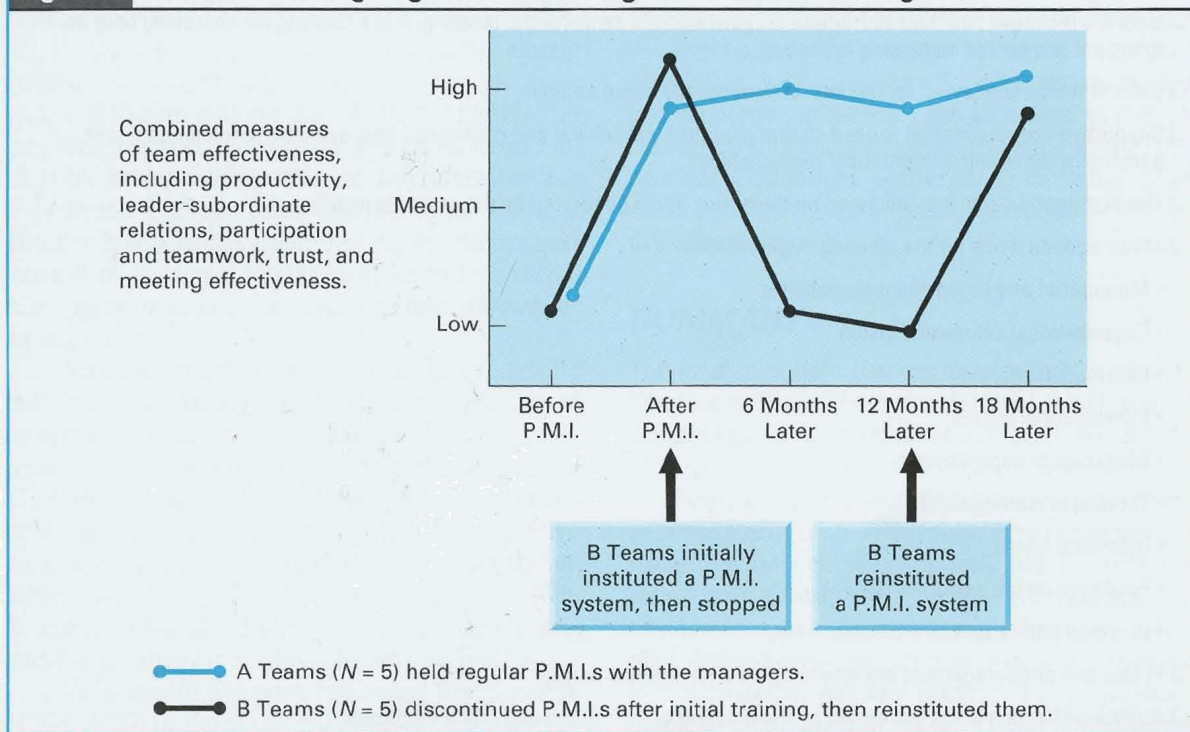
those that did not, significant differences were noted in organizational performance, employee performance and satisfaction, and personal stress management scores. The facilities that had instituted a personal management interview program were significantly higher performers on all the personal and organizational performance dimensions. Figure 4 compares the performance effectiveness of teams and departments that implemented the program to those that did not.

Our own personal experience is also consistent with the empirical findings. We have conducted personal management interviews with individuals we have supervised in a variety of professional and church organization settings. We also have conducted these sessions with our individual family members. Rather than being an imposition and an artificial means of communication, these sessions—held one-on-one with each child, for example—have been incredibly productive. Close bonds have resulted, open sharing of information and feelings has emerged, and the (monthly) meetings themselves are eagerly anticipated by both us and our family members.

Instituting a personal management interview program consists of two steps. First, a role-negotiation session is held in which expectations, responsibilities, standards of evaluation, reporting relationships, and so on, are clarified. Unless such a meeting is held, most subordinates do not have a clear idea of exactly what is expected of them or on what basis they will be evaluated. In our own experiences with managers and executives, few have expressed confidence that they know precisely what is expected of them or how they are being evaluated in their jobs. In a role-negotiation session, that uncertainty is overcome. The manager and subordinate negotiate all job-related issues that are not prescribed by policy or by mandate. A written record of the agreements and responsibilities that result from the meeting should be made. This can serve as an informal contract between the manager and the subordinate. The goal of a role-negotiation session is to obtain clarity for both parties regarding what each expects from the other. Because this role negotiation is not adversarial, but rather focuses on supportiveness and team building, the eight supportive communication principles should characterize the interaction. In our families, these agreements have centered on household chores, planned vacations, father–daughter or father–son activities, and so on.

Figure 4 Effects of an Ongoing Personal Management Interview Program

Combined measures of team effectiveness, including productivity, leader-subordinate relations, participation and teamwork, trust, and meeting effectiveness.

B Teams initially instituted a P.M.I. system, then stopped

B Teams reinstituted a P.M.I. system

A Teams (N = 5) held regular P.M.I.s with the managers.

B Teams (N = 5) discontinued P.M.I.s after initial training, then reinstituted them.

LEARNING

The second, and most important, step in a personal management interview plan is a program of ongoing, one-on-one meetings of the manager with each subordinate. These meetings are regular (not just when a mistake is made or a crisis arises) and private (not overheard by others) for good reason. They provide the two parties with a chance to communicate freely, openly, and collaboratively. They also provide managers with the opportunity to coach and counsel subordinates and to help them improve their own skills or job performance. Therefore, each meeting should last from 45 minutes to an hour and focus on items such as managerial and organizational problems, information sharing, interpersonal issues, obstacles to improvement, training in management skills, individual needs, feedback on job performance, and personal concerns or problems.

The meeting always leads toward action items to be accomplished before the next meeting, some by the subordinate and others by the manager. It is not a meeting just to hold a meeting. Without agreements as to specific actions that will be taken, and accountability that will be maintained, it can be a waste of both people's time. Both parties prepare for the meeting, and both bring items to be discussed. It is not a formal appraisal session called by the manager, but a development and improvement session in which both the manager and subordinate have a stake. It is a chance for subordinates to have personal time with the manager to work out issues and report information; consequently, it helps eliminate unscheduled interruptions and long, inefficient group meetings. At each subsequent meeting, action items are reviewed from previous meetings, so that continuous improvement is encouraged. The meeting, in other words, becomes an institutionalized continuous improvement activity. It is also a key to building the collaboration and teamwork needed in modern organizations. Table 6 summarizes the characteristics of the personal management interview program.

Boss's research found that a variety of benefits resulted in teams that instituted this program. It not

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Table 6 | Characteristics of a Personal Management Interview Program

❑ The interview is regular and private.

❑ The major intent of the meeting is continuous improvement in personal, interpersonal, and organizational performance, so the meeting is action oriented.

❑ Both the manager and the subordinate prepare agenda items for the meeting. It is a meeting for improving both of them, not just for the manager's appraisal.

❑ Sufficient time is allowed for the interaction, usually about an hour.

❑ Supportive communication is used so that joint problem solving and continuous improvement result (in both task accomplishment and interpersonal relationships).

❑ The first agenda item is a follow-up on the action items generated by the previous meeting.

❑ Major agenda items for the meeting might include:

- Managerial and organizational problems
- Organizational values and vision
- Information sharing
- Interpersonal issues
- Obstacles to improvement
- Training in management skills
- Individual needs
- Feedback on job performance
- Personal concerns and problems

❑ Praise and encouragement are intermingled with problem solving.

❑ A review of action items generated by the meeting occurs at the end of the interview.

only increased their effectiveness, but it improved individual accountability, department meeting efficiency, and communication flows. Managers actually found more discretionary time available because the program reduced interruptions and unscheduled meetings. Furthermore, participants defined it as a success experience in itself. When correction or negative feedback had to be communicated, and when coaching or counseling was called for (which is typical of almost every manager–subordinate relationship at some point), supportive communication helped strengthen the interpersonal relationship at the same time that problems were solved and performance improved. In summary, setting aside time for formal, structured interaction between managers and their subordinates in which supportive communication played a part produced markedly improved bottom-line results in those organizations that implemented the program.

International Caveats

It is important to keep in mind that cultural differences sometimes call for a modification of the skills discussed in this book. For example, Asian managers are often less inclined to be open in initial stages of a conversation, and they consider managers from the United States or Latin America to be a bit brash and aggressive because they may be too personal too soon. Similarly, certain types of response patterns may differ among cultures—for example, deflecting responses are more typical of Eastern cultures than Western cultures. The language patterns and language structures across cultures can be dramatically different, and remember that considerable evidence exists that individuals are most effective interpersonally, and they display the greatest amount of emotional intelligence, when they recognize, appreciate, and capitalize on these differences among others.

Whereas stylistic differences may exist among individuals and among various cultures, certain core principles of effective communication are, nevertheless, critical. The research on interpersonal communication among various cultures and nationalities confirms that the eight attributes of supportive communication are effective in all cultures and nationalities (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Triandis, 1994). These eight factors have almost universal applicability in solving interpersonal problems.

We have used Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars's (1998, 2000) model of cultural diversity to identify key differences among people raised in different cultural

contexts. Differences exist on an *affectivity orientation* versus a *neutral orientation*. Affective cultures (e.g., the Middle East, Southern Europe, South Pacific) are more inclined to be expressive and personal in their responses than neutral cultures (e.g., East Asia, Scandinavia). Sharing personal data and engaging quickly in sensitive topics may be comfortable for people in some cultures but very uncomfortable in others. The timing and pace of communication will vary, therefore, among different cultures. Similarly, *particularistic* cultures (e.g., Korea, China, Indonesia) are more likely to allow individuals to work out issues in their own way compared to *universalistic* cultures (e.g., Norway, Sweden, United States), where a common pattern or approach is preferred. This implies that reflective responses may be more common in particularistic cultures and advising responses more typical of universalistic cultures. For example, when individuals are assumed to have a great deal of individual autonomy, coaching responses (directing, advising, correcting) are less common than counseling responses (empathizing, probing, reflecting) in interpersonal problem solving.

Research by Trompenaars (1996), Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), and others clearly points out, however, that the differences among cultures are not great enough to negate or dramatically modify the principles outlined in this chapter. Regardless of the differences in cultural background of those with whom you interact, being problem centered, congruent, descriptive, validating, specific, conjunctive, owned, and supportive in listening are all judged to indicate managerial competence and serve to build strong interpersonal relationships. Sensitivity to individual differences and styles is an important prerequisite to effective communication.

SUMMARY

The most important barriers to effective communication in organizations are interpersonal. Much technological progress has been made in the last two decades in improving the accuracy of message delivery in organizations, but communication problems still persist between managers and their subordinates and peers. A major reason for these problems is that the communication does not support a positive interpersonal relationship. Instead, it frequently engenders distrust, hostility, defensiveness, and feelings of incompetence and low self-esteem. Ask any manager about the major problems being faced in his or her organizations, and communication problems will most assuredly be listed.

Dysfunctional communication is seldom associated with situations in which compliments are given, congratulations are made, a bonus is awarded, or other positive interactions occur. Most people have little trouble communicating effectively in positive or complimentary situations. The most difficult, and potentially harmful, communication patterns are most likely to emerge when you are giving feedback on poor performance, saying "no" to a proposal or request, resolving a difference of opinion between two subordinates, correcting problem behaviors, receiving criticism from others, or facing other negative interactions. These situations also arise frequently in the context of coaching and counseling others. Handling these situations in a way that fosters interpersonal growth and engenders stronger relationships is one mark of an effective manager.

In this chapter, we pointed out that effective managers adhere to the principles of supportive communication. Thus, they ensure greater clarity and understanding of messages while making other persons feel accepted, valued, and supported. Of course, it is possible to become overly concerned with technique in trying to incorporate these principles and thereby to defeat the goal of being supportive. One can become artificial, or incongruent, by focusing on technique alone, rather than on honest, caring communication. But if the principles are practiced and consciously implemented in everyday interactions, they can be important tools for improving your communication competence.

BEHAVIORAL GUIDELINES

The following behavioral guidelines will help you practice supportive communication:

1. Differentiate between coaching situations, which require giving advice and direction to help foster behavior change, and counseling situations, in which understanding and problem recognition are the desired outcomes.

2. Communicate congruently by acknowledging your true feelings without acting them out in destructive ways. Make certain that your statements match your feelings and thoughts.

3. Use descriptive, not evaluative, statements. Describe objectively what occurred, describe your reactions to events and their objective consequences, and suggest acceptable alternatives.

4. Use problem-oriented statements rather than person-oriented statements; that is, focus on behavioral referents or characteristics of events, not attributes of the person.

5. Use validating statements that acknowledge the other person's importance and uniqueness. Communicate your investment in the relationship by demonstrating your respect for the other person and your flexibility and humility in being open to new ideas or new data. Foster two-way interchanges rather than dominating or interrupting the other person. Identify areas of agreement or positive characteristics of the other person before pointing out areas of disagreement or negative characteristics.

6. Use specific rather than global (either–or, black-or-white) statements, and, when trying to correct behavior, focus on things that are under the control of the other person rather than factors that cannot be changed.

7. Use conjunctive statements that flow smoothly from what was said previously. Ensure equal speaking opportunities for others participating in the interaction. Do not cause long pauses that dominate the time. Be careful not to completely control the topic being discussed. Acknowledge what was said before by others.

8. Own your statements, and encourage the other person to do likewise. Use personal words ("I") rather than impersonal words ("management").

9. Demonstrate supportive listening. Make eye contact and be responsive nonverbally. Use a variety of responses to others' statements, depending on whether you are coaching or counseling someone else. Have a bias toward the use of reflective responses.

10. Implement a personal management interview program characterized by supportive communication, in order to coach, counsel, and foster personal development among individuals for whom you have responsibility.