PART I
Foundations of Group Communication

1
Introducing Group Principles and Practices

“Working together works.”
—Rob Gilbert

CHAPTER OUTLINE
What Is Small Group Communication?
What Is Team Communication?
Communicating Collaboratively: Advantages and Disadvantages
Communicating in Different Types of Groups
Communicating in Virtual Groups and Teams
How Can You Become a Competent Small Group Communicator?

OBJECTIVES
After studying this chapter, you will be able to:
■ Define small group communication.
■ Discuss the characteristics of a team.
■ List and describe the advantages and disadvantages of working with others in groups and teams.
■ Compare and contrast primary and secondary groups.
■ Describe five virtual communication methods.
■ Identify nine group communication competencies.
Human beings are creatures who collaborate. We need to establish relationships with others. We are raised in family groups. We are educated and entertained in groups, and we work and worship in groups.

Regardless of your career choice, you will spend a considerable part of your work life collaborating with others. One survey of Fortune 500 companies found that 81 percent use team-based approaches to organize the work that needs to be done.¹ In addition, 77 percent use temporary teams and work groups when new projects develop.² The typical manager spends a quarter of the workweek in group meetings. The higher you rise in position and leadership authority, the more time you’ll spend in meetings. Top-level leaders spend up to two-thirds of their time—an average of three days a week—in meetings or preparing for meetings.³

Not all of our collaborations are face-to-face. In the twenty-first century, our collaboration has dramatically increased because of our use of technology. We are hyperconnected. Computer power that once needed a room-size space now fits in our pocket. We not only GoToMeetings online (thanks to GoToMeeting software), but because of “iCommunication” devices (iPhone, iPad, iPods), numerous apps, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and ultra-high-speed-big-data-cloud-computing methods, we are connected to virtual groups and teams nearly all of our waking moments. Collaboration is a daily element of our work, family, and social lives.⁴

Yet despite our constant collaboration, we sometimes (even often) have difficulty working collectively. Collaboration is hard. Collaboration takes skill. And groups can exist for constructive as well as destructive reasons.⁵ Communication researcher Susan Sorenson coined the term grouphate to describe the dread and repulsion many people have about working in groups, teams, or attending meetings.⁶ We have good news. Grouphate diminishes when people receive training and instruction about working in groups. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to help you learn communication principles and become skilled in the practices that make working in groups productive and enjoyable.

Communication is the central focus of this book. Communication makes it possible for groups and teams to exist and function. If you use the book as a tool to help you learn to communicate in groups, you will distinguish yourself as a highly valued group member.
What Is Small Group Communication?

Consider these situations:

■ After the stock market plunges 1000 points in a week, the President of the United States appoints a high-level team of economists to identify the causes of the market collapse.
■ In a bid by the social networking site Connect.com to merge with a rival company, Relate.com, the Chair of the Board of Connect.com calls the board together to consider the virtues and pitfalls of the possible merger.
■ To prepare for the final exam in your group communication class, you and several class members meet three nights each week to study.

Each of these three examples involves a group of people meeting and communicating for a specific purpose. And as group members communicate with one another, they are communicating transactively—they are simultaneously responding to one another and expressing ideas, information, and opinions. Although the purposes of the groups in these three scenarios are quite different, the groups have something in common—something that distinguishes them from a cluster of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator, for example. Just what is that “something”? What are the characteristics that make a group a group? We define small group communication as communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another. Let’s explore this definition in more detail.

Communication

Reduced to its essence, communication is the process of acting on information. Someone does or says something, and there is a response from someone else in the form of an action, a word, or a thought. Merely presenting information to others does not mean there is communication: Information is not communication. “But I told you what I wanted!” “I put it in the memo. Why didn’t you do what I asked?” “It’s in the syllabus.” Such expressions of exasperation assume that if you send a message, someone will receive it. However, communication does not operate in a linear, input–output process. What you send is rarely what others understand.

Human Communication: Making Sense and Sharing That Sense with Others

Human communication is the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages. Let’s examine the key elements of this definition.

Communication Is about Making Sense: We make sense out of what we experience when we interpret what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Typically, in a small group, multiple people are sending multiple messages, often at the same time. To make sense out of the myriad of messages we experience, we look for patterns or structure; we relate what happens to us at any given moment to something we’ve experienced in the past.

Communication Is about Sharing Sense: We share what we experience by expressing it to others and to ourselves. We use words as well as nonverbal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, clothing, music) to convey our thoughts and feelings to others.

Communication Is about Creating Meaning: Meaning is created in the hearts and minds of both the message source and the message receiver. We don’t send meaning, we create it based on our experiences, background, and culture.
Communication Is about Verbal and Nonverbal Messages: Words and nonverbal behaviors are symbols that we use to communicate and derive meaning that makes sense to us. A symbol is something that represents a thought, concept, object, or experience. The words on this page are symbols that you are using to derive meaning that makes sense to you. Nonverbal symbols such as our use of gestures, posture, tone of voice, clothing, and jewelry primarily communicate emotions—our feelings of joy or sadness, our likes and dislikes, or whether we’re interested or uninterested in others.

Human Communication Is Transactional Live, in-person, human communication is transactional, meaning that when we communicate, we send and receive messages simultaneously. As you talk to someone, you respond to that person’s verbal and nonverbal messages, even while you speak. In the context of a small group, even if you remain silent or nod off to sleep, your nonverbal behavior provides information to others about your emotions and interest, or lack of interest. The transactive nature of communication suggests that you cannot not communicate. Ultimately, people judge you by your behavior, not by your intent. And since you behave in some way (even when you’re asleep), there is the potential for someone to make sense out of your behavior.

Human Communication Can Be Mediated Through Different Channels Key elements of communication include the source, message, receiver, and channel. The source of the message is the originator of the ideas and feelings expressed. The message is the information being communicated. The receiver of the message is the person or persons who interpret the message. The channel is the means by which the message is expressed to the receiver.

Do groups need to communicate face to face to be considered a group? More and more small group meetings occur in a mediated setting—a setting in which the channel of communication is a phone line, fiber-optic cable, wireless signal, the Internet, or other means of sending messages to others; the interaction is not face to face. In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly easy and efficient to collaborate using the Internet, and other technological means of communicating. So, yes: A group can be a group without meeting face to face.

In the past three decades we have learned more about how mediated communication can enhance group communication. For example, there is evidence that groups linked together only by e-mail or a computer network can generate more and better ideas than groups that meet face to face. Such communication may, however, be hindered by sluggish feedback or delayed replies, which are not problems when we collaborate in person. And although more ideas may be generated in a mediated meeting, complex problems and relationship issues are better handled in person than on the Internet or through another mediated network. In most cases, in-person communication affords the best opportunity to clarify meaning and resolve uncertainty and misunderstanding. We will discuss the use of technology in groups and teams in a section in this chapter and throughout the book in a special feature called Virtual Groups.

Human Communication: Essential for Effective Group Outcomes Does the quality of communication really affect what a group accomplishes? Because this is a book about group communication, you won’t be surprised that our answer is yes. Researchers have debated, however, the precise role of communication in contributing to a group’s success. Success depends on a variety of factors besides communication, such as the personality of the group members, how motivated the members are to contribute, how much information members have, and the innate talent group members have for collaboration. Nevertheless, several researchers have found that the way group members communicate with each other is crucial in determining what happens when people collaborate. Research investigating the importance of small group communication in a variety of situations continues to increase.
A Small Group of People

A group includes at least three people; two people are a dyad. The addition of a third person immediately adds complexity and an element of uncertainty to the transactive communication process. The probability increases that two will form a coalition against one. And although the dynamics of group roles, norms, power, status, and leadership are also present in two-person transactions, they become increasingly important in affecting the outcome of the transaction when three or more people communicate.

If at least three people are required for a small group, what is the maximum number of members a group may have and still be considered small? Scholars do not agree on a specific number. However, having more than 12 people (some say 13, others say 20) in a group significantly decreases individual members’ interaction. Research documents that larger groups just aren’t as effective as smaller groups. The larger the group, the less influence each individual has on the group and the more likely it is that subgroups will develop. With 20 or more people, the communication more closely resembles a public-speaking situation when one person addresses an audience, providing less opportunity for all members to participate freely. The larger the group, the more likely it is that group members will become passive rather than actively involved in the discussion.

Meeting with a Common Purpose

The president’s economic task force, the Connect.com company executives’ group, and your communication study group have one thing in common: Their members have a specific purpose for meeting. They share a concern for the objectives of the group. Although a group of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator may share the goal of transportation, they do not have a collective goal. Their individual destinations are different. Their primary concerns are for themselves, not for others. As soon as their individual goals are realized, they leave the bus or elevator. On the other hand, a goal keeps a committee or discussion group together until that goal is realized. Many groups fail to remain together because they never identify their common purpose. While participants in small groups may have somewhat different motives for their membership, a common purpose cements the group together.

Feeling a Sense of Belonging

Not only do group members need a mutual concern to unite them, they also need to feel they belong to the group. Commuters waiting for a bus probably do not feel part of a collective effort. Members of a small group, however, need to have a sense of identity with the group; they should be able to feel it is their group. Members of a small group are aware that a group exists and that they are members of the group.

Exerting Influence

Each member of a small group, in one way or another, potentially influences others. Even if a group member sits in stony silence while other group members actively verbalize opinions and ideas, the silence of that one member may be interpreted as agreement by another. As we will discuss in Chapter 7, nonverbal messages have a powerful influence on a group’s climate.

At its essence, the process of influencing others defines leadership. To some degree, each member of a small group exerts some leadership in the group because of his or her potential to influence others. Although some groups have an elected or appointed leader, most group members have some opportunity to share in how the work gets done and how group members relate to each other. Thus, if we define the role of leader rather broadly, each group member has
an opportunity to fill the role of leader by offering contributions and suggestions. Regardless of its size, a group achieves optimal success when each person accepts some responsibility for influencing and leading others.

To repeat our definition: **Small group communication** is defined as communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.

**What Is Team Communication?**

"Go, team!" You can hear this chant at most sports events. Whether playing a touch football game or in the Super Bowl, members of sports teams are rewarded for working together. Corporate America has also learned that working in teams can enhance productivity, efficiency, worker satisfaction, and corporate profits. Regardless of whether its members play football or construct web pages, a **team is a coordinated group of individuals organized to work together to achieve a specific, common goal.** Teamwork is increasingly emphasized as a way to accomplish tasks and projects because teamwork works. An effectively functioning team gets results. Research clearly documents the increased use of teams in corporate America during the past two decades, especially in larger, more complex organizations.

Because we have clearly defined small group communication, you may be wondering, “What’s the difference between a group and a team?” Often people use the terms **group** and **team** interchangeably. But are they different concepts, or is there merely a semantic difference
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between a group and a team? Our view is that teams are often more highly structured than typical small groups. All teams are small groups, but not all groups operate as a team.

Business and nonprofit organizations tend to use the term *team* rather than *group* to identify individuals who work together to achieve a common task. Corporate training departments often spend much time and money to train their employees to be better team members. What skills do such training programs focus on? Most programs cover the communication principles and practices that we will emphasize in this book: problem solving, decision making, listening, and conflict management. In addition to using communication skills, team members set goals, evaluate the quality of their work, and establish team operating procedures. Research has found that people who have been trained to work together in a team are, in fact, better team members. So the news is good: There is evidence that learning principles and practices of group and team communication can enhance your performance.

Highly effective teams usually have at least four attributes that give the term *team* distinct meaning. Let’s take a closer look at how distinctions are sometimes made between teams and groups.

1. Team goals are clear and specific (win the game, win the championship).
2. Teams have well-defined team-member responsibilities, such as positions on a sports team (first base, shortstop, and so on).
3. The rules for and expectations about how the team operates are spelled out; sports team competitions usually have a referee to enforce the rules of the game.
4. Teams usually develop a clear way of coordinating their efforts; sports teams discuss and practice how to work together.

**Teams Develop Clear, Well-Defined Goals** Team goals are clear, specific, and measurable. They are also more than could be achieved by any individuals on the team. Research has found convincing evidence that teams that develop and use clear goals perform better than groups without clear-cut goals. A sports team knows that the goal is to win the game. An advertising team’s goal is to sell the most product. Yes, all groups, too, have a goal, but the goal may be less measurable or clear. A team develops a clear goal so that the members know when they’ve achieved it.

**Teams Develop Clearly Defined Roles, Duties, and Responsibilities for Team Members** People who belong to a team usually have a clear sense of their particular role or function on the team. As on a sports team, each team member has an understanding of how his or her job or responsibility helps the team achieve the goal. The roles and responsibilities of team members are explicitly discussed. If one team member is absent, other team members know what needs to be done to accomplish that person’s responsibilities. Sometimes team members may be trained to take on several roles just in case a team member is absent; this kind of training is called **cross-functional team-role training**. Team members’ understanding other members’ responsibilities helps the team to work more effectively. In a group, the participants may perform specific roles and duties, but on a team, greater care must be devoted to explicitly ensuring that the individual roles and responsibilities are clear and are linked to a common goal or outcome. In fact, the key challenge in team development is to teach individuals who are used to performing individual tasks how to work together.

**Teams Have Clearly Defined Rules for and Expectations about Team Operation** A third difference between groups and teams is that teams develop specific operating systems to help them function well. A **rule** is a prescription for acceptable behavior. For
example, a team may establish as a rule that all meetings will start and end on time. Another rule may be that if a team member is absent from a meeting, the absent member will contact the meeting leader after the meeting. Although expectations develop in groups, in a team those expectations, rules, and procedures are often overtly stated or written down. Team members know what the rules are and how those rules benefit the entire team.

**Teams Have Coordinated and Collaborative Methods for Accomplishing the Work** A fourth difference between groups and teams involves the methods team members use to accomplish their goals. Team members discuss how to collaborate and work together. Sports teams spend many hours practicing how to anticipate the moves of other team members so that, as in an intricate dance, all team members are moving to the same beat. Team members develop interdependent relationships; what happens to one affects everyone on the team. Of course, team members may be given individual assignments, but those assignments are clearly coordinated with other team members’ duties so that all members are working together. Coordination and collaboration are the hallmark methods of a team. Research has found that teams that are trained to coordinate and adapt their communication with one another have greater success than teams not trained to coordinate their communication. Although groups work together, they may accomplish their goal with less collaboration and coordination.

Even though we’ve made distinctions between groups and teams, we are not saying they are dramatically different entities. Think of these two concepts as existing on a continuum; some gatherings will have more elements of a group, whereas others will be closer to our description of a team. Keep in mind also that all teams are small groups, which means that throughout the book when we refer to a team we will also be referring to a small group. And the principles and practices of effective small group communication will thus also apply to teams.

**Characteristics of an Effective Team**

Several researchers have been interested in studying how to make teams function better. One study found that team members need work schedules compatible with those of their colleagues, adequate resources to obtain the information needed to do the work, leadership skills, and help from the organization to get the job done. Another study concluded that it’s not how smart team members are, but how well they communicate that improves teamwork. Using studies of several real-life teams (such as NASA, McDonald’s, and sports teams), Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto identified eight hallmarks of an effective team. The more of these characteristics a team has, the more likely it is that the team will be effective.

**A Clear, Elevating Goal** Having a common, well-defined goal is the single most important attribute of an effective team. But having a goal is not enough; the goal should be elevating and important—it should excite team members and motivate them to make sacrifices for the good of the team. Sports teams use the elevating goal of winning the game or the championship. Corporate teams also need an exciting goal that all team members believe is important.

**A Results-Driven Structure** To be results-driven is to have an efficient, organized, and structured method of achieving team outcomes. Team structure is the way in which a team is organized to process information and achieve the goal. Explicit statements of who reports to whom and who does what are key elements of team structure. It is useful, therefore, for teams to develop a clear sense of the roles and responsibilities of each team member. A team needs...
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York in 1850, changed his name to Henry Steinway, and with four of his sons started his own piano company. Since 1853 each piano has been made by a team of workers with exacting standards. Steinway pianos have remained the most desired piano by concert pianists for over 100 years. Steinway pianos are found in 95 percent of all concert halls in the world because of the unflinching high standards of each piano-making team. Having high standards of excellence is an important element in a team that endures.34

External Support and Recognition  Teams in any organization do not operate in isolation. They need support from outside the team to help acquire the information and materials needed to do the job. Perhaps that’s why evidence suggests that teams who have a broad social network of colleagues and friends perform better than teams who don’t have a well-developed social network.35 Team members also need to be recognized and rewarded for their efforts by others outside the team.36 Positive, reinforcing feedback enhances team performance and feelings of team importance.37 There’s evidence that less positive support from others discourages some team members from giving their full effort; negative feedback causes more group members to not give their full effort.38 Most coaches acknowledge the “home-field advantage” that flows from the enthusiastic support and accolades of team followers. Corporate teams, too, need external support and recognition to help them function at maximum effectiveness.

Principled Leadership  Teams need effective leaders. This is not to say that a team requires an authoritarian leader to dictate who should do what. On the contrary, teams usually function more effectively when they adopt shared approaches to leadership. In most effective teams, leadership responsibilities are spread throughout the team. We will discuss leadership principles in more detail in Chapter 9.

Characteristics of Effective Team Members

One top-selling management book, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, nominated five things team members should not do if the team wants to be effective:

1. Don’t trust other team members.
2. Fear conflict.
3. Don’t be committed to the team.
4. Avoid accountability.
5. Don’t focus on achieving results.39

If you’ve been in a dysfunctional team, these five characteristics may be familiar to you.

But rather than focusing only on what not to do, we take a more positive approach by emphasizing what researchers suggest team members should do to be effective. Here is what researchers have found enhances teamwork.40

Experience  Effective team members have practical experience in managing the problems and issues they face; they’ve “been there, done that.” Less-experienced team members tend not to see the big picture and may lack the technical background needed to accomplish the task.

Problem-Solving Skills  The ability to overcome obstacles to achieve goals is an essential team skill. Effective team members skillfully identify and solve problems. Being indecisive, dithering, and shying away from team problems has a negative impact on team success.
Openness  Openness is a basic ingredient for team success; having team members who are straightforward and willing to appropriately discuss delicate issues is a predictor of team success. Team members who are not open to new ideas and who participate less are perceived as less valuable to the team.

Supportiveness  Supportive team members listen to others, are willing to pitch in and accomplish the job, and have an optimistic outlook about team success. Non-supportive members try to control team members and focus on their individual interests rather than on team interests.

Action Oriented  Team members who focus on “strategic doing” as well as on “strategic thinking” are vital for team success. Effective team members respond when action needs to be taken. Procrastinating and being slow to take action reduce team effectiveness.

Positive Personal Style  Effective team members are motivated, patient, enthusiastic, friendly, and well liked. By contrast, being competitive, argumentative, and impatient are perceived as hindrances to team success.

Positive Overall Team Perceptions  Effective team members believe they have the skills and resources to accomplish their task. Team members who think they will be less effective are, in fact, less effective. And team members who are more effective think they will have more positive results because of the self-perceived quality of the team. Are team members effective because of a self-fulfilling prophecy (expecting to be effective causes them to act effectively)? Or do team members think they are effective because they really are outstanding? We’re not quite sure what the precise cause-and-effect relationship is between self-perceptions of being effective and effective performance. Perhaps team members who are optimistic about their success...
also work better with others and are cooperative. The bottom line is: Team member optimism appears to enhance team effectiveness.

It’s one thing to know what effective team members should do to be effective (such as being supportive, understanding the problem-solving process, and having a positive personal style), but more important than only knowing what to do is actually putting the principles into practice. The research is clear that team members who receive team training in how to perform specific skills to enhance team performance are more effective.47

**Team Learning and Adapting** It’s been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and then expecting different results. Effective team members learn from both their successes and their failures. Specifically, researchers have found support for the principle that team members who learn how to overcome obstacles and adapt their behavior to achieve their goals are more successful than those who don’t learn and adapt. Effective teams learn best not by merely going to classes or reading books, but by actively exploring, reflecting, discussing mistakes, seeking feedback from others, and experimenting with new methods and procedures.48 They see what results they get and then adapt their behavior accordingly. Ineffective teams don’t learn from their mistakes and don’t try new things; they keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

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**PUTTING PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE**

**Strategies for Becoming a Competent Team Member**

Group communication researcher Jessica Thompson discovered the following behaviors can enhance your perception of competence when you work with other team members.49

- **BE THERE.** Spend time together with other team members; team members who didn’t spend as much time interacting with one another weren’t perceived as competent.
- **TALK ABOUT TRUSTING OTHERS.** Explicitly talk about the importance of trusting one another; make trust a specific expectation for all team members by verbalizing the importance of developing trust.
- **TALK ABOUT THE TASK.** Talk about the task you are undertaking as a team; rather than just quietly doing the work, explicitly talk about what the team is doing to accomplish the team goal.
- **BE CLEAR.** Make sure the meanings of words and phrases are clear by defining words that may be unfamiliar to other team members; also, avoid using unfamiliar acronyms (abbreviations for phrases, such as “PDC” for Personnel and Discipline Committee) unless such phrases are common knowledge to all team members.
- **LISTEN.** Listen to one another and observe and reflect upon what team members see and hear.
- **TALK “BACKSTAGE.”** Engage in talk “backstage” — talk with group members outside formal group meetings; develop a relationship with group members that is not solely based on being task oriented.
- **LAUGH.** Have fun together. Use appropriate humor, share jokes, and laugh with one another.

What are the behaviors that might hurt the perception of a team member’s competence? According to the same researcher, here’s a list of what not to do:

- **BE NEGATIVE.** Question the expertise of other group members.
Communicating Collaboratively: Advantages and Disadvantages

There is no question about it: You will find yourself working in groups and teams. Collaborative projects are becoming the mainstay method of accomplishing work in all organizations. Students from kindergarten through graduate school are frequently called on to work on group projects.

How do you feel about working in groups and teams? Maybe you dread attending group meetings. Perhaps you agree with the observation that a committee is a group that keeps minutes but wastes hours. You may believe that groups bumble and stumble along until they reach some sort of compromise—a compromise with which no one is pleased. "To be effective," said one observer, "a committee should be made up of three people. But to get anything done, one member should be sick and another absent."

By understanding both the advantages and the potential pitfalls of working collaboratively, you will form more realistic expectations while capitalizing on the virtues of group work and minimizing the obstacles to success. First, we'll identify advantages of group collaboration and then we'll present potential disadvantages.

**Advantages**

**Your Group Has More Information Than You Do**  On the TV game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* contestants who phone a friend get the right answer to the question 65 percent of the time. But if the contestant asks the audience for help, they get the right answer 91 percent of the time. There's wisdom in groups and teams. Because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences that individuals bring to a group, the group as a whole has more information and ideas from which to seek solutions to a problem than one person would have alone. Research clearly documents that a group with diverse backgrounds, including ethnic diversity, comes up with better-quality ideas. With more information available, the group is more likely to discuss all sides of an issue and is also more likely to arrive at a better solution. The key, of course, is whether group members share what they know. When group members do share information, the group outcome is better than when they don’t share what they know with other group members. Although group members tend to start out by discussing what they already know, groups still have the advantage of having greater potential information to share with other group members.

**Groups Stimulate Creativity**  Research on groups generally supports the maxim that “two heads are better than one” when it comes to solving problems. Groups usually make better decisions than individuals working alone, because groups have more approaches to or methods.
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of solving a specific problem. A group of people with various backgrounds, experiences, and resources can more creatively consider ways to solve a problem than one person can.

**You Remember What You Discuss**  Working in groups and teams fosters improved learning and comprehension, because you are actively involved rather than passive. Imagine that your history professor announces that the final exam is going to be comprehensive. History is not your best subject. You realize you need help. What do you do? You may form a study group with other classmates. Your decision to study with a group of people is wise; education theorists claim that when you take an active role in the learning process, your comprehension of information is improved. If you studied for the exam by yourself, you would not have the benefit of asking and answering questions of other study group members. By discussing a subject with a group, you learn more and improve your comprehension of the subject.

**You Are More Likely to Be Satisfied with a Decision You Help Make**  Group problem solving provides an opportunity for group members to participate in making decisions and achieving the group goal. Individuals who help solve problems in a group are more committed to the solution and better satisfied with their participation in the group than if they weren’t involved in the discussion.

**You Gain a Better Understanding of Yourself**  Working in groups helps you gain a more accurate picture of how others see you. The feedback you receive makes you aware of personal characteristics that you may be unaware of but that others perceive. By becoming sensitive to feedback, you can understand yourself better (or at least better understand how others perceive you) than you would if you worked alone. Group interaction and feedback can be useful in helping you examine your interpersonal behavior and in deciding whether you want to change your communication style.

Why do these advantages occur? One explanation is called social facilitation. 57 Social facilitation is the tendency for people to work harder simply because there are other people present. 58 Why does this happen? Some researchers suggest that the increased effort may occur because people need and expect positive evaluations from others; some people want to be liked and they work harder when others are around so that they gain more positive feedback. Social facilitation seems to occur with greater consistency if the group task is simple rather than complex.

**Disadvantages**

Although working in small groups and teams can produce positive results, problems sometimes occur when people congregate. Consider some of the disadvantages of working in groups. Identifying these potential problems can help you avoid them.

**Group Members May Pressure Others to Conform to the Majority Opinion in Order to Avoid Conflict**  Most people do not like conflict; they generally try to avoid it. Some people avoid conflict because they believe that in an effective group, members readily reach agreement. But this tendency to avoid controversy in relationships can affect the quality of a group decision. What is wrong with group members reaching agreement? Nothing, unless they are agreeing to conform to the majority opinion or even to the leader’s opinion just to avoid conflict. Social psychologist Irving Janis calls this phenomenon groupthink—when groups agree primarily in order to avoid conflict. 59 Chapter 8 discusses conflict in small groups, talks about groupthink in more detail, and suggests how to avoid it.
Communicating Collaboratively: Advantages and Disadvantages

An Individual Group or Team Member May Dominate the Discussion

In some groups it seems as if one person must run the show. That member wants to make the decisions and insists that his or her position on the issue is the best one. “Well,” you might say, “if this person wants to do all the work, that’s fine with me. I won’t complain. It sure will be a lot easier for me.” Yes, if you permit a member or two to dominate the group, you may do less work yourself, but then you forfeit the greater fund of knowledge and more creative approaches that come with full participation. Other members may not feel satisfied because they feel alienated from the decision making.

Try to use the domineering member’s enthusiasm to the group’s advantage. If an individual tries to monopolize the discussion, other group members should channel that interest more constructively. The talkative member, for example, could be given a special research assignment. Of course, if the domineering member continues to monopolize the discussion, other group members may have to confront that person and suggest that others be given an opportunity to present their views.

Some Group Members May Rely Too Much on Others to Get the Job Done

One potential problem of working in groups is that individuals may be tempted to rely too much on others rather than pitch in and help. The name for this problem is social loafing. Some group members hold back on their contributions (loaf), assuming others will do the work. They can get away with this because in a group or team, no one will be able to pin the lack of work on a single group member. There is less accountability for who does what. Working together distributes the responsibility of accomplishing a task. Spreading the responsibility among all group members should be an advantage of group work. However, when some group members allow others to carry the workload, problems can develop. Just because you are part of a group does not mean that you can get lost in the crowd. Your input is needed. Do not abdicate your responsibility to another group member.

To avoid this problem, encourage less-talkative group members to contribute to the discussion. Also, make sure each person knows the goals and objectives of the group. Encouraging each member to attend every meeting helps, too. Poor attendance at group meetings is a sure sign that members are falling into the “Let someone else do it” syndrome. Finally, see that each person knows and fulfills his or her specific responsibilities to the group.

Working with Others in a Group or Team Takes Longer Than Working Alone

For many people, one of the major frustrations about group work is the time it takes to accomplish
ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COMMUNICATING COLLABORATIVELY

**Advantages**
- Groups have more information.
- Groups are often more creative.
- Group work improves learning.
- Group members are more satisfied if they participate in the process.
- Group members learn about themselves.

**Disadvantages**
- Group members may pressure others to conform.
- Groups could be dominated by one person.
- Group members may rely too much on others and not do their part.
- Group work takes more time than working individually.

Tasks. Not only does a group have to find a time and place where everyone can meet (sometimes a serious problem in itself), but a group simply requires more time to define, analyze, research, and solve problems than do individuals working alone. It takes time for people to talk and listen to others. And, as you’ve heard, time is money! One researcher estimates that one 2-hour meeting attended by 20 executives would cost the equivalent of a week’s salary for one of them. Still, talking and listening in a group usually result in a better solution.

**When Not to Collaborate**

Although we’ve noted significant advantages to working in groups and teams, our discussion of the disadvantages of groups and teams suggests there may be situations when it’s best not to collaborate. What situations call for individual work? Read on.

**When the Group or Team Has Limited Time**

If a decision must be made quickly, it may sometimes be better to delegate the decision to an expert. In the heat of battle, commanders usually do not call for a committee meeting of all their troops to decide when to strike. True, the troops may be better satisfied with a decision that they have participated in making, but the obvious need for a quick decision overrides any advantages that may be gained from meeting as a group.

**When an Expert Already Has the Answer**

If you want to know what it’s like to be president of a university, you don’t need to form a committee to answer that question; go ask some university presidents what they do. Or, if you want to know mathematical formulas, scientific theories, or other information that an expert could readily tell you, go ask the expert rather than forming a fact-finding committee. Creating a group to gather information that an expert already knows wastes time.

**When the Information Is Readily Available from Research Sources**

In this information age, a wealth of information is available with a click of a mouse. It may not be necessary to form a committee to chase after information that already exists. It may be helpful to put together a group or team if the information needed is extensive and several people are needed to conduct an exhaustive search. But if names, facts, dates, or other pieces of information can be quickly found in an encyclopedia or on the Internet, use those methods rather than making a simple task more complex by forming a group to get the information.
When Group Members Are Involved in Unmanageable Conflict and Contention  Although both of your authors are optimists, sometimes bringing people together for discussion and dialogue is premature. When conflict clearly may explode into something worse, it may be best to first try other communication formats before putting warring parties in a group to discuss. What may be needed instead of group discussion is more structured communication, such as mediation or negotiation with a leader or facilitator. Or, if group members have discussed an issue and just can’t reach a decision, they may decide to let someone else make the decision for them. The judicial system is used when people can’t or won’t work things out in a rational, logical discussion.

However, don’t avoid forming or participating in groups just because of conflict. As you will learn in Chapter 7, conflict is virtually always present in groups; disagreements can challenge a group to develop a better solution. But if the conflict is intractable, another method of making the decision may be best.

Me Versus We

The personal pronouns I, me, and my can be significant stumbling blocks to collaboration. A focus on individual concerns (me) can be a major challenge to collaborating with others (we). Most North Americans value individual achievement over collective group or team
Chapter 1 Introducing Group Principles and Practices

accomplishment. Researchers describe our tendency to focus on individual accomplishment as individualism. According to Geert Hofstede, individualism is the “emotional independence from groups, organizations, or other collectivities.” Individualistic cultures value individual recognition more than group or team recognition. They encourage self-actualization—the achievement of one’s potential as an individual. The United States, Britain, and Australia usually top the list of countries in which individual rights and accomplishment are valued over collective achievement.

By contrast, collectivistic cultures value group or team achievement more than individual achievement. People from Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan typically value collaboration and collective achievement more than do those from individualistic cultures. Venezuela, Colombia, and Pakistan are other countries in which people score high on a collective approach to work methods. In collectivistic cultures, we is more important than me. Collectivistic cultures usually think of a group as the primary unit in society, whereas individualistic cultures think about the individual.

As you might guess, people from individualistic cultures tend to find it more challenging to collaborate in group projects than do people from collectivistic cultures. Table 1.1 contrasts individualistic and collectivistic assumptions about working in small groups. The advantages of communicating in groups and teams are less likely to occur if individualistic assumptions consistently trump collectivistic assumptions.

### TABLE 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic Assumptions</th>
<th>Collectivistic Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most effective decisions are made by individuals.</td>
<td>The most effective decisions are made by teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning should be centralized and done by the leaders.</td>
<td>Planning is best done by all concerned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals should be rewarded.</td>
<td>Groups or teams should be rewarded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals work primarily for themselves.</td>
<td>Individuals work primarily for the team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy competition between colleagues is more important than teamwork.</td>
<td>Teamwork is more important than competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings are mainly for sharing information with individuals.</td>
<td>Meetings are mainly for making group or team decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get something accomplished, you should work with individuals.</td>
<td>To get something accomplished, you should work with the whole group or team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A key objective in group meetings is to advance your own ideas.</td>
<td>A key objective in group meetings is to reach consensus or agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team meetings should be controlled by the leader or chair.</td>
<td>Team meetings should be a place for all team members to bring up what they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group or team meetings are often a waste of time.</td>
<td>Group or team meetings are the best way to achieve a goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communicating in Different Types of Groups

There are two broad categories of groups—primary and secondary. Within these broad types, groups can be categorized according to their purpose and function. To give you an idea of the multiple types of groups you belong to, we’ll define these two broad types and then note specific functions within each type.

Primary Groups

A primary group is a group whose main purpose is to give people a way to fulfill their need to associate with others. It is primary in the sense that the group meets the primary human need to relate to others. The main function of the primary group is to perpetuate the group so that members can continue to enjoy one another’s company. Primary groups typically do not meet regularly to solve problems or make decisions, although they sometimes do both of those things.

Family Groups  Your family is the most fundamental of all primary groups. In his poem “The Death of the Hired Man,” Robert Frost mused, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there/They have to take you in.” Family communication usually does not follow a structured agenda; family conversation is informal and flows naturally from the context and content emerging from the family experiences. Although family groups do accomplish things together, at the core of a family group is the association of simply being a family.

Social Groups  In addition to family groups you also have groups of friends who interact over an extended period of time. These groups exist to meet the primary human need for fellowship and human interaction. As in a family group, conversation in social groups, such as your various...
groups of friends, is informal and typically does not have a pre-planned agenda. You associate with one another for the joy of community—to fulfill the basic human need to be social. Our focus in this book is less with primary groups and more with secondary groups, which accomplish specific tasks such as problem solving, decision making, and learning.

**Secondary Groups**

Secondary groups exist to accomplish a task or achieve a goal. Most of the groups you belong to at work or school are secondary groups. You are not involved in a committee or a class group assignment just for fun or to meet your social need for belonging (even though you may enjoy the group and make friends with other group members). The main reason you join secondary groups is to get something done. There are several kinds of secondary groups to which you may belong at some point in your life.

**Problem-Solving Groups**  A problem-solving group exists to overcome some unsatisfactory situation or obstacles to achieving a goal. Many, if not most, groups in business and industry are problem-solving groups. The most common problem that any organization faces (whether it’s a for-profit business or a nonprofit group) is finding a way to make more money. Chapters 10 and 11 will review principles and suggestions for improving your group problem-solving ability.

**Decision-Making Groups**  The task of a decision-making group is to make a choice from among several alternatives. The group must identify what the possible choices are, discuss the consequences of the choices, and then select the alternative that best meets a need or achieves the goal of the group or parent organization. A committee that screens applicants for a job has the task of making a decision. The group must select one person from among the many who apply.

As we will discuss in Chapter 10, decision making is usually a part of the problem-solving process. Groups that have a problem to solve usually must identify several possible solutions and decide on the one that best solves the problem. Although all group problem solving involves making decisions, not all group decision making solves a problem.

**Study Groups**  As a student, you are no doubt familiar with study groups. The main goal of these groups is to gather information and learn new ideas. We have already noted that one advantage of participating in a group is that you learn by being involved in a discussion. A study group also has the advantage of having access to more information and a wider variety of ideas through the contribution of different individuals.

**Therapy Groups**  A therapy group, also called an encounter group, support group, or T-group, helps group members work on personal problems or provides encouragement and support to help manage stress. Such groups are led by professionals who are trained to help members overcome, or at least manage, individual problems in a group setting. Group therapy takes advantage of the self-understanding that members gain as they communicate with one another. Members also learn how they are perceived by others. By participating in a therapy group, people with similar problems can benefit by learning how others have learned to cope. Groups such as Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous also provide positive reinforcement when members have achieved their goals. By experiencing therapy with others, members take advantage of the greater knowledge and information available to the group.

**Committees**  A committee is a group of people who are elected or appointed for a specific task. Some committees are formed to solve problems. Others are appointed to make a decision
Communicating in Virtual Groups and Teams

or simply to gather information so that another group, team, or committee can make a decision. A committee may be either a standing committee (one that remains active for an extended time period) or an ad hoc committee (one that disbands when its special task has been completed). Like many other people, you may react negatively to serving on a committee. Committee work is often regarded as time-consuming, tedious, and ineffective—except in increasing the sale of aspirin! Perhaps you have heard that “a committee is a way of postponing a decision,” or “a committee is a group of people who individually can do nothing and who collectively decide nothing can be done.” Although frustration with committees is commonplace, you are not doomed to have a negative experience when working with others on a committee. Throughout this book we review principles and skills of group communication that can help you enhance the quality of committee meetings. In Appendix A, we will provide specific tips for leading and participating in meetings.

Focus Groups  A focus group is a small group of people who are asked to focus on a particular topic or issue so that others can better understand the group’s responses to the topic or issue presented. One person usually serves as moderator, and this person asks open-ended questions and then simply listens to the responses of the group members. Many advertising agencies show new advertising campaigns to focus groups and then listen to the response of the group members to assess the impact or effectiveness of the campaign.

Communicating in Virtual Groups and Teams

With today’s technological advances, people can work together even when they are physically in different locations. Virtual small group communication (also called electronically mediated communication) consists of three or more people who collaborate from different physical locations, perform interdependent tasks, have shared responsibility for the outcome of the work, and rely on some form of technology to communicate with one another. A phone line,
fiber-optic cable, wireless signal, satellite signal, or other technology connects people who are communicating in a virtual group. Although technology seems to be a pervasive and revolutionary fact of life—in both our personal and our professional lives—communication researchers predict that technology will play an even larger role in how we collaborate with one another in the future.73 Although there is evidence that we will spend increasing amounts of time collaborating in virtual groups, we may not always enjoy doing so. Evidence suggests that although virtual groups and teams can perform just as effectively, in most instances, as face-to-face groups and teams, we don’t enjoy the work as much as we do when we are collaborating live and in person.74 Research also suggests that virtual groups need special support in place to help them operate at peak effectiveness.75

Channels of Virtual Collaboration

As a twenty-first century communicator, you have a variety of channels you can use to collaborate with others. The channel, as you recall from our discussion earlier in the chapter, is simply the means by which messages are expressed. Typical channels include voice only messages, simple text (such as e-mail or phone text messages), video, and more elaborate meeting management systems that could use text or both text and video.

**Voice** The telephone conference call—one of the first uses of technology to support group and team meetings—involves a group of people agreeing to “meet” at a certain time by phone. To hold a conference call, you may need a special telephone service, available from most phone companies, so that several people in different locations can be connected at the same time.

**Text** Whether texting or e-mailing someone from your computer, using a social networking site such as Facebook, or sharing documents using Google docs or other document sharing software, you will likely use written text to send and receive collaborative messages.

Communicating with group members via e-mail or text can be effective for the discussion of routine business. There is some evidence, however, that groups that make decisions by e-mail have a more difficult time reaching agreement.76 Other research, however, suggests that electronic correspondence has the advantage of minimizing status differences that may be present if people meet face to face.77 Yet another research team found that groups that use e-mail while solving problems are more likely to do a better job analyzing the problem than groups that interact face to face.78 Researchers continue to learn new applications, as well as the advantages and disadvantages, of using e-mail to collaborate.79

**Video** A video group or team conference occurs when three or more people are linked by the Internet (using a camera connected or built in to a computer) or satellite-linked TV. With the advent of mini-cameras and affordable or free software, it has become increasingly easy for groups to hold video conference meetings using programs such as Skype on the Internet. Several studies have found that a video meeting is more likely to be successful if group members have met one another prior to the video meeting.80 Another study found that video-conferences are better than face-to-face meetings when participants are involved in more structured discussion.81 Group members seem to prepare better for a video-conference than for a face-to-face meeting perhaps group members perceive a video conference as more important than an ordinary meeting.

**Electronic Meeting Systems** Electronic meeting systems (EMS) consist of computer software programs (sometimes requiring special hardware) that help group members
collaborate when not meeting face to face. Some EMS use only text, others combine text, PowerPoint, photos, and video. Also referred to as group decision support systems (GDSS) or group support systems (GSS), these technologies are all based on similar principles. GoTo Meeting is one popular software program that lets participants share what’s on their personal computer with the entire group, including PowerPoint slides, data summaries, and written reports. Webinars are seminars that are held via the Internet that could be as simple as voice messages combined with PowerPoint slides; some webinars use more sophisticated, interactive software.

EMS can be used by people who are sitting at computer keyboards in the same room at the same time, projecting what people type onto a large screen. Sometimes people talk to each other directly, just as they would in any face-to-face meeting; at other times they can make contributions via their keyboards. Using EMS, group members can brainstorm ideas, vote, outline ideas, or expand on the ideas of others. EMS can also be used when people are not in the same room at the same time.

Using Web pages or Wiki, group and team members can collaborate in the same electronic space using a common Web page that functions as an electronic bulletin board. Members can go to the Web page for information and may be permitted to change or delete information. Each member has access to what others have gathered and shared. Group members can also paste calendars and schedules onto the Web page to help organize the work.

Wikipedia is a giant Web page (technically called a Wiki) that lets people from all over the world collaborate by retrieving information from this electronic encyclopedia or adding information to it. (Because almost anyone can add information to Wikipedia, many of your instructors may discourage you from liberally quoting from a Wikipedia article because the source of the information may not be known.)

**Differences Between Virtual and Non-Virtual Collaboration**

How is electronically mediated group and team collaboration different from live, face-to-face meetings? There are six key differences: (1) time, (2) varying degrees of anonymity, (3) potential for deception, (4) nonverbal messages, (5) written messages, and (6) distance.

Time

Electronic technology makes it possible for you to use virtual methods of communication under four conditions: (1) same time/same place; (2) same time/different place; (3) different time/same place; and (4) different time/different place.

An **asynchronous message** is a message that is not read, heard, or seen at the same time you send the message; there is a time delay between when you send and receive a message. Sending a text message to someone who is not monitoring Facebook or leaving a voice message for someone are examples of asynchronous messages. **Synchronous messages** are those that occur instantly and simultaneously—there is no time delay between when you send a message and the other person receives it. A live video-conference is an example of a synchronous message.

The more synchronous our interaction, the more similar it is to face-to-face interactions. The more a technology resembles a face-to-face conversation, the more social presence there is. **Social presence** is the feeling we have when we act and think as if we’re involved in an unmediated, face-to-face conversation. Technically, there is always some delay in sending and receiving messages (even in face-to-face interactions, sound takes time to travel, but that “delay” is really imperceptible). The key distinction among different forms of EMS and the degree of social presence we experience is whether we feel we are in a synchronous interaction. When
we send text messages back and forth or instant-message with a group of people, we create a shared sense of social or psychological presence with our collaborators.

**Varying Degrees of Anonymity**  Maybe you’ve seen the cartoon of a cocker spaniel sitting at a computer typing the words “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” Being able to contribute to a group and knowing that other group members may not know who you are can be liberating and make you feel freer to share ideas with others. Because you can be anonymous, you may say things that are bolder, more honest, or even more outrageous than if your audience knew who you were. But it may also be easier for a group or team member not to contribute to the conversation because there is no accountability for who says what; a group member may just decide to read what others have to say rather than adding to the conversation.

**Potential for Deception**  Being anonymous may tempt you and other group members to say things that aren’t true. Because with many forms of EMS you can’t see or hear others, it’s easier to lie. A survey of 191 students at one college found that 40 percent had lied on the Internet. Fifteen percent lied about their age, 8 percent about their weight, 6 percent about appearance, 6 percent about marital status, and 3 percent about what sex they were.

**Nonverbal Messages**  Words and graphics become more important when collaborating virtually compared to face-to-face communication because when texting or e-mailing you must rely solely on them to carry nonverbal cues. Of course, a YouTube video does include nonverbal messages; but even on YouTube some cues may be limited, such as the surrounding context and reactions from others.

Some researchers have found that trust takes longer to develop in virtual forms of communication because team members can’t see one another. Since visual cues provide confirmation of verbal messages, without seeing other members, trust takes longer to develop.

There are some basic things text users do to add emotion to their messages, including CAPITALIZING THE MESSAGE (which is considered “yelling”), making letters bold, inserting graphics, or using emoticons such as smiley faces ☺, a frowning face with glasses 😞, and so on. In face-to-face communication we laugh, smile, or frown in direct response to what others are saying. One team of researchers found that we use emoticons to provide emotional punctuation in our written message. Also, the ability to tease or make sarcastic remarks is limited when using text messages. Because there is no tone of voice in the written message, emoticons help provide information about the intended emotional tone of what is written. You can also write out an accompanying interpretation—for example, “What a kook you are! (just kidding)” —to compensate for the limits of emotional cues.

**Written Messages**  Reliance on the written word also affects virtual collaborations. One online scholar suggests that a person’s typing ability and writing skills affect the quality of any relationship that is developed. The ability to encode thoughts quickly and accurately into written words is not a skill everyone has. Not only do writing skills affect your ability to express yourself online, they also affect how others perceive you. Your written messages provide insights to others about your personality, skills, sense of humor, and even your values.

**Distance**  Although we certainly can collaborate virtually with people who live and work in the same building (or even the same room), there is typically greater physical distance between people who are communicating virtually. When using the Internet or a cell phone, we can just as easily send a text or video message to someone on the other side of the globe as we can to someone on the other side of the room.
Virtual Group and Team Theory

Three theories have been developed that further explain and predict how we use electronic meeting systems. The role of nonverbal messages is an integral part of each of these theories.

Cues-Filtered-Out Theory  One early theory of communication via the Internet was the cues-filtered-out theory. This theory suggests that emotional expression is severely restricted when we communicate using only text messages; the nonverbal cues such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice are filtered out. The assumption was that text messages were best used for brief, task-oriented messages such as sharing information or asking questions; text messages were assumed to be less effective in helping people establish meaningful relationships or in solving more complex problems.89 This theory also suggests that because of the lack of nonverbal cues and other social information, we are less likely to use text-based electronic messages to manage relationships. Although using Facebook or Myspace may include photos, videos, and ample personal information, it’s still not as rich as a face-to-face conversation.

Media Richness Theory  Another theory helps us predict which form of media we would use, depending on the richness required to convey messages, especially emotional and relational ones. Media richness theory suggests that the richness of a communication channel is based upon four criteria: (1) the amount of feedback that the communicators can receive, (2) the number of cues that the channel can convey and that can be interpreted by a receiver, (3) the variety of language that communicators use, and (4) the potential for expressing emotions and feelings.90 Using these four criteria, researchers have developed a continuum of communication channels, from communication-rich to communication-lean. As illustrated below, face-to-face conversation is the most media rich, and simply posting an announcement or a flyer is the most media lean.

A Continuum of Media-Rich to Media-Lean Message Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media rich</th>
<th>Media lean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face, one-on-one discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face group meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video-conference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone conversation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer conference (interactive e-mail)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninteractive e-mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal letter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal memo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted flyer or announcement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is some evidence that those wishing to communicate a negative message, such as ending a relationship, may select a less-rich communication message—they may be more likely to send a letter or an e-mail rather than share the bad news face to face.\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, people usually want to share good news in person, where they can enjoy the positive reaction. Both the cues-filtered-out theory and media richness theory suggest that the restriction of nonverbal cues, which provide information about the nature of the relationship, hamper the quality of relationships that can be established using EMS. But a newer perspective suggests that eventually we may be able to discern relational information using EMS.

**Social Information-Processing Theory** Social information-processing theory suggests that we can communicate relational and emotional messages via the Internet, but it just may take longer to express messages that are typically communicated using facial expressions and tone of voice. A key difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication is the rate at which information reaches you. During a live, in-person conversation, you process a lot of information quickly; you process the words you hear as well as the many nonverbal cues you see (facial expression, gestures, and body posture) and hear (tone of voice and the use of pauses). During text-only interactions, there is less information to process (no audio cues or visual nonverbal expressions), so it takes a bit longer for the relationship to develop—but it does develop as you learn more about your e-mail partner’s likes, dislikes, and feelings.

Social information-processing theory also suggests that if you expect to communicate with your electronic communication partner again, you will likely pay more attention to the relationship cues—expressions of emotions that are communicated directly (such as someone’s writing “I’m feeling bored in this meeting today”) or indirectly (such as when you write a long e-mail message and your e-mail collaborator writes back only a sentence, suggesting he or she may not want to spend much time “talking” today).

A study by Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther extended the application of social information-processing theory. They investigated how computer-mediated communication affects how much information people reveal about themselves, how quickly they reveal it, and the overall impressions people get of one another. In comparing computer-mediated exchanges with face-to-face conversations, Tidwell and Walther found that people in computer-mediated “conversations” asked more direct questions, which resulted in people revealing more, not less, information about themselves when online.\textsuperscript{92}

Also, if you expect to communicate with your electronic partner again, there is evidence that you will pay more attention to the relationship cues that develop. In one study, Joseph Walther and Judee Burgoon found that the development of relationships between people who meet face to face differed little from those between people who had computer-mediated interactions.\textsuperscript{93} In fact, they found that many computer-mediated groups actually developed more satisfying relationships than the face-to-face groups.

**How Can You Become a Competent Small Group Communicator?**

In the chapters ahead, we discuss principles and skills designed to enhance your competence as a member of a small group. You may be wondering “precisely what does a competent communicator do?” A competent group communicator is a person who is able to interact appropriately and effectively with others in small groups and teams. Communication researcher Michael Mayer found that the two most important behaviors of group members were (1) fully
How Can You Become a Competent Small Group Communicator?

participating in the discussion, especially when analyzing a problem, and (2) offering encouraging, supportive comments to others. Stated succinctly: Participate and be nice.

As a prelude to this book’s discussion of the ideas and strategies that enhance communication in small groups, we will first introduce a more specific definition of competence and then present nine core small group communication competencies.

VIRTUAL GROUPS

Best Practices for Virtual Group and Team Collaboration

It’s one thing to understand how virtual group collaboration is different from collaborating face to face, and to understand different theoretical approaches to virtual collaboration, but what you may want to know is, what are the do’s and don’ts of collaborating virtually?

Participating in Virtual Groups

One researchers recommends six best practices that can enhance virtual team success:

■ START EARLY. It takes longer to develop relationships when participating in virtual teams.

■ COMMUNICATE OFTEN. The messages need not be lengthy, but more frequent message exchanges lets other group members know you’re still involved and connected.

■ MULTITASK. Teams can work on more than one task at a time by dividing and conquering the work. It’s okay to make assignments and have different team members working on different parts of the project all at the same time.

■ RESPOND TO OTHERS’ MESSAGES. Overtly acknowledge that you have read another person’s message.

■ BE CLEAR. People can’t guess what you’re thinking because they can’t see you, so spell out what you think and feel when writing e-mail or text messages.

■ SET DEADLINES. Team members should be given clear, specific due dates, and they should report whether or not they are meeting them.

Leading Virtual Groups

If you are in a leadership role and are encouraging others to collaborate virtually, there are several things that you can do to support a virtual group. Specifically, the following situations seem to help virtual teams function best:

■ PROVIDE THE RIGHT RESOURCES. Teams have adequate resources, such as the right people, adequate time to do the work, and enough money to buy what they need to get the job done.

■ USE APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY. Make sure term members aren’t slowed down by ineffective technology.

■ PROVIDE GOOD TECH SUPPORT. It’s important that team members have someone who can help them use the technology effectively—especially when the technology doesn’t work or breaks down.

■ OPENLY REWARD AND COMPLIMENT TERM MEMBERS. Make sure team members feel valued.

■ EFFECTIVE TECHNOLOGY TRAINING. Team members should be appropriately trained in using the technology to stay connected.

■ ENSURE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILL. Team members should have appropriate training in communication skills, technical skills, customer service skills, and in how to collaborate from remote locations.
The Essence of Communication Competence

Researchers who have studied how to enhance communication competence suggest that three elements are involved in becoming a truly competent communicator: (1) you must be motivated, (2) you must have appropriate knowledge, and (3) you must have the skill to act appropriately.96

Motivation  Motivation is an internal drive to achieve a goal. To be motivated means you have a strong desire to do your best, even during inevitable periods of fatigue and frustration. If you are motivated to become a competent small group communicator, you probably have an understanding of the benefits or advantages of working with others in groups.

Knowledge  Knowledge is the information you need to do competently what needs to be done. One key purpose of this book is to give you knowledge that can help you become a more competent communicator in groups, on teams, and during the many meetings you will undoubtedly attend in the future.

Skill  A skill is an effective behavior that can be repeated when appropriate. Just having the desire to be effective (motivation) or being able to rattle off lists of principles and theories (knowledge) doesn’t ensure that you will be competent; you have to have the skill to put the principles into practice. The subtitle of this book—Principles and Practices—emphasizes the importance of being able to translate into action what you know and think.

Research supports the commonsense conclusion that practicing group communication skills, especially when you practice the skills in a group or team setting, enhances your group performance.97

The Nine Core Small Group Communication Competencies

Although we’ve described the personal qualities of competent group or team members, you may still be wondering, “What specifically do effective group members do?” Following is an overview of some of the competencies that are essential for members of problem-solving groups. It’s important to emphasize that this overview targets problem-solving discussions. To solve a problem or to achieve a goal you must seek to overcome an obstacle. There is more communication research about how to solve problems and make effective decisions in small groups and teams than on any other topic. The overview presented here sketches some of the core competencies that can result in more effective group outcomes. We will expand on this overview in the chapters ahead.

The nine competencies are grouped into four categories.

- **Problem-oriented competencies** focus on defining and analyzing a problem.
- **Solution-oriented competencies** concern identifying solution criteria, generating solutions, and evaluating solutions.
- **Discussion-management competencies** help the group stay focused on the task and manage the interaction. Finally,
- **relational competencies** are concerned with managing conflict and maintaining a positive group climate.

These competencies were identified after examining several bodies of research and consulting with several instructors of small group communication.98
It seemed simple enough. Their history professor had divided the class into groups of five or six people to present an oral report to the class about the Civil War. Each group had an assigned topic. Although there was some class time devoted to the project, the professor assumed that the groups would also spend some out-of-class time to collaborate on the report. The problem, however, was that the members of the group assigned to cover the Battle of Appomattox all had part-time jobs, two members had busy lives as parents, and another member commuted to campus an hour away. After comparing their schedules it was obvious they were going to have difficulty finding a time when they could all get together.

They decided that rather than meeting face to face, they would connect outside class via the Internet. Although the professor wanted them to meet in person, the group just didn’t see how that was possible. So they exchanged e-mail addresses and agreed to share information online. They found, however, that it was tricky to make much progress. A couple of group members weren’t clear about the goal of the assignment and just waited for others to start sharing information to see what the group project was all about. Because of a heavy workload, another member just didn’t have time to devote to the project and didn’t seem very committed to the group. There were two members who started sharing their research findings with the entire group; yet when they realized they were the only two doing the work, they stopped volunteering to share their information with the group and only shared their work with each other. One of the top-performing group members started criticizing the group members who weren’t doing their fair share of the work. The criticism didn’t do much for the group’s climate. Soon members were spending more time complaining about their colleagues than they were working on the project.

At the midway point the group wasn’t making much progress. Something needed to be done to get the group back on track or they were going to present an oral report that would not only be embarrassingly bad, but would also significantly lower their course grade. The professor scheduled one more in-class meeting and announced that the rest of the time the groups would have to meet on their own. The Battle of Appomattox group sensed disaster looming. Mistrust and inaction on the project were increasing.

Questions for Analysis
1. What are the key problems this group is having?
2. What should the group focus on when they have their in-class meeting? What key issues should they identify and discuss?
3. What principles of teamwork, presented on pages 6–13, could the group use to energize and function as a more effective team?
4. What disadvantages to working in groups and teams is this group experiencing? What could the group do to counter the disadvantages and keep them from escalating?
5. Based on the discussion of virtual groups and teams on pages 21–26 and the best practices for virtual groups and teams on page 27, what can they do to more effectively use the Internet or other technology to make progress?
6. If you were making specific recommendations to the group to get back on track, what would you suggest?

Problem-Oriented Competencies
1. Define the problem. Effective group members clearly and appropriately define or describe the problem to be solved and the obstacles to be overcome. Ineffective group members either define the problem inaccurately or make little or no attempt to clarify the problem or issues confronting the group.
2. **Analyze the problem.** Effective group members offer statements that clearly and appropriately examine the causes, history, symptoms, and significance of the problem to be solved. Ineffective members either don’t analyze the problem or they do so inaccurately or inappropriately.

**Solution-Oriented Competencies**

1. **Identify criteria.** Effective group members offer clear and appropriate comments that identify the goal the group is attempting to achieve or identify specific criteria (or standards) for an acceptable solution or outcome for the problem facing the group. Ineffective group members don’t clarify the goal or establish criteria for solving the problem. Ineffective groups aren’t sure what they are looking for in a solution or outcome.

2. **Generate solutions.** Effective group members offer several possible solutions or strategies to overcome obstacles or decision options regarding the issues confronting the group. Ineffective group members offer fewer solutions, or they rush to make a decision without considering other options or before defining and analyzing the problem.

3. **Evaluate solutions.** Effective group members systematically evaluate the pros and cons of the solutions that are proposed. Ineffective group members examine neither the positive and negative consequences nor the benefits and potential costs of a solution or decision.

**Discussion-Management Competencies**

1. **Maintain task focus.** Effective group members stay on track and keep their focus on the task at hand. Although almost every group wanders off track from time to time, the most effective groups are mindful of their goal and sensitive to completing the work before them. Effective group members also summarize what the group is discussing to keep the group oriented. Ineffective group members have difficulty staying on track and frequently digress from the issues at hand. They also seldom summarize what the group has done, which means that group members aren’t quite sure what they are accomplishing.

2. **Manage interaction.** Effective group members don’t monopolize the conversation; rather, they actively look for ways to draw quieter members into the discussion. Neither are they too quiet; they contribute their fair share of information and look for ways to keep the discussion from becoming a series of monologues; they encourage on-task, supportive dialogue. Ineffective group members either rarely contribute to the discussion or monopolize the discussion by talking too much. They also make little effort to draw others into the conversation and are not sensitive to the need for balanced interaction among group members.

**Relational Competencies**

1. **Manage conflict.** Conflict occurs in the best of groups. Effective group members are sensitive to differences of opinion and personal conflict, and they actively seek to manage the conflict by focusing on issues, information, and evidence rather than on personalities. Ineffective group members deal with conflict by making it personal; they are insensitive to the feelings of others and generally focus on personalities at the expense of issues.

2. **Maintain climate.** Effective group members look for opportunities to support and encourage other group members. Although they may not agree with all comments made, they actively seek ways to improve the climate and maintain positive relationships with other group members through both verbal and nonverbal expressions of support. Ineffective group members do just the opposite: They are critical of others, and their frowning faces and
How Can You Become a Competent Small Group Communicator?

Strident voices nonverbally cast a gloomy pall over the group. Ineffective members rarely use appropriate humor to lessen any tension between members.

Communicating effectively in small groups and teams involves a variety of competencies. Even as we present these nine competencies, we are not suggesting that they are the only things you need to learn; instead, we present them as a practical beginning to learning the essentials of communicating in small group problem solving and decision making.

A competent communicator has not only knowledge and skill but also the motivation to work well with others. In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum suggested that while he was in kindergarten he mastered the basics of getting along with others and accomplishing tasks effectively. This book is designed to add to what you learned in kindergarten and later, so you can become a valued member of the groups to which you belong.

Each of the nine group communication competencies is founded on the assumption that to be a competent communicator, you must be an ethical communicator. Ethics are the beliefs, values, and moral principles by which we determine what is right and what is wrong. Ethical principles are the basis for many of the decisions we make in our personal and professional lives. Throughout the book we will be spotlighting the importance of being an ethical group communicator in a feature, we call Collaborating Ethically: What Would You Do? Each one poses an ethical question or dilemma and then invites you to consider the most ethical course of action to take. The first one appears below.

**What Would You Do?**

Your underlying ethical principles are like your computer’s operating system, which is always on when you are working with other programs on your computer. How you interact with others is based on your underlying assumptions and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways to treat others.

Suppose you found yourself in the following situation. Your group communication instructor has assigned all students to small groups to work on a semester-long group project. One member of your group has a friend who took the course last semester with a different instructor. He suggests that your group select the same discussion topic that his friend had so that the group could benefit from the research already gathered by his friend’s group. Your group can also do some original research to build on the previous group’s research, but you will rely heavily on the information already collected. Is it ethical to use the work of another group in this situation? Are there any conditions that would make it more ethical to use the work of the previous group? Even if the group you’re in gathers additional research, is it appropriate to “borrow” heavily from the work already completed by others, especially if the goal is to learn how to conduct original research?

*What would you do?*
WHAT IS SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION?

Objective 1 Define small group communication.

Group Communication Principles
Small group communication is communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.

Key Terms
Group 2
Small group communication 3
Communication 3
Human communication 3
Symbol 4
Transactional 4
Source 4
Message 4
Receiver 4
Channel 4
Mediated setting 4
Dyad 5
Small group 5

Practice Applying and Assessing Your Skills

Agree–Disagree Statements
Read each statement once. Mark whether you agree (A) or disagree (D) with each statement. Take five or six minutes to do this.

1. _____ A primary concern of all group members should be to establish an atmosphere in which all feel free to express their opinions.
2. _____ In a group with a strong leader, an individual is able to feel more personal security than in a leaderless group.
3. _____ Individuals who are part of working groups should do what they think is right, regardless of what the groups decide to do.
4. _____ It is sometimes necessary to use autocratic methods to obtain democratic objectives.
5. _____ Sometimes it is necessary to push people in the direction you think is right, even if they object.
6. _____ It is sometimes necessary to ignore the feelings of others in order to reach a group decision.
7. _____ One should not openly criticize or find fault with leaders who are doing their best.
8. _____ Democracy has no place in a military organization such as an air task force or an infantry squad, when it is engaged in battle.
9. _____ When everybody in the group has to be considered before making a decision, much time is wasted talking.
10. _____ Almost any job that can be done by a committee can be done better by giving one individual responsibility for the job.
11. _____ By the time most people reach maturity, it is almost impossible for them to increase their skills in group participation.

After you have marked the statements, form small groups and try to agree or disagree unanimously with each statement. Try especially to find reasons for differences of opinion. If your group cannot reach agreement or disagreement, you may change the wording in any statement to promote unanimity.

WHAT IS TEAM COMMUNICATION?

Objective 2 Discuss the characteristics of a team.

Group Communication Principles
A team is a coordinated group of individuals organized to work together to achieve a specific, common goal.

Learn to recognize the key elements that make a team effective: a clear, elevating goal; a results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; a collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; principled leadership.
Cultivate those characteristics of individual team members that enhance team effectiveness: experience; problem-solving ability; openness; supportiveness; action-oriented approach; positive personal style.

Key Terms
Team 6
Cross-functional team-role training 7
Rule 7

Practice Applying and Assessing Your Skills
Rating Your Team
Use the following assessment scale to rate a team you are part of. For each characteristic described, rate your team on a scale from 1 (not very effective) to 10 (exceptional). The higher the score (out of a possible 80 points), the more likely it is that your team is a high-performing team. These eight team characteristics are based on the work of Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto, as described in their book *Teamwork: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong* and discussed on pages 8–10.

1. Our team clearly states its goals and mission. Each team member knows the primary task, product, or service that we are responsible for. Our clear, elevating (exciting) goal is written down and referred to often in our discussions.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Our team is well organized. Each team member knows what his or her task or assignment is. We have a results-driven structure. We are not often distracted by “busy work” and tasks that do not relate to our primary mission.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. Our team has highly competent and skilled members. They are among the best possible team members available to achieve our goal.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Our team is unified. We are all committed to achieving a common goal. We are a cohesive team. We talk about the importance of reaching group agreement and team consensus.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. Our team has a supportive work climate. We give each other praise. We manage our conflicts in a positive, supportive way. We work well together.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. Our team has high standards of excellence. We talk about the importance of doing a high-quality job. Doing a job well is important to all team members.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. We are rewarded for our good work. We reward each other, and we are rewarded in meaningful ways by others in this organization. We receive support and recognition for our high-quality work.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Our team has good leaders to help us do our work. Our leaders are skilled and knowledgeable. Our leaders are sensitive to other team members’ needs.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

COMMUNICATING COLLABORATIVELY: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Objective 3 List and describe the advantages and disadvantages of working with others in groups and teams.

Group Communication Principles
Working in groups has advantages: more information, more creative, improves learning, members are more satisfied, members learning about themselves.

Working in groups has disadvantages: members may pressure others to conform, group could be dominated by one person, members may rely on others and not do their part, group work takes more time than individual work.

Key Terms
Social facilitation 14
Groupthink 14
Social loafing 15
CHAPTER 1

Practice Applying and Assessing Your Skill

Get-Acquainted Scavenger Hunt

Your instructor will ask you to find people in your class or your group who match as many of the following descriptions as possible. When you meet someone who matches a particular description, write his or her name on the line opposite it. Use this as a way of getting better acquainted with people with whom you will be working or studying.101

1. Someone with your eye color
2. Someone born in the same state you were
3. Someone whose astrological sign is the same as yours
4. Someone who likes the same sport you do
5. Someone who likes your favorite food
6. Someone who has the same number of letters in his or her name
7. Someone who feels it is okay to cry in public
8. Someone who is the youngest in the family
9. Someone who would like to write a book
10. Someone who has seen the same movie at least three times
11. Someone who has traveled outside the United States
12. Someone who likes to ski
13. Someone who is an only child
14. Someone who can speak two languages
15. Someone who likes to cook

▶ COMMUNICATING IN VIRTUAL GROUPS AND TEAMS

Objective 5 Describe four virtual communication methods.

**Group Communication Principles**

Virtual small group communication consists of three or more people who collaborate from different physical locations, perform interdependent tasks, have shared responsibility for the outcome of the work, and rely on some form of technology to communicate with one another.

Methods of virtual collaboration include the telephone, e-mail, video, and the use of electronic meeting systems.

**Key Terms**

Virtual small group communication 21
Webinars 23

Assessing Virtual Group Practice

Use the following assessment instrument to help you determine whether a virtual group you belong to is operating at peak efficiency.

1 = Yes  2 = Sometimes Yes  3 = Uncertain  4 = Sometimes No  5 = No

M01_BEEB0833_11_SE_C01.indd   34
0x0
12/02/14   1:46 PM
1. Our group meets face to face, especially early in our group's history, to establish procedures and rules that structure how we will interact virtually.

2. Our group sends frequent messages to the entire group.

3. Our group sends frequent messages to individual group members.

4. Our group has divided the overall task into smaller tasks.

5. Our group has assigned group members to specific tasks linked to achieving the group's goal.

6. Our group acknowledges receiving electronic messages from one another.

7. Our group develops clear, brief messages that are usually understood by other group members.

8. Our group sets deadlines.

9. Our group meets deadlines.

10. Our group members understand and appropriately use technology to help us stay connected.

► HOW CAN YOU BECOME A COMPETENT SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATOR?

Objective 6 Identify nine group communication competencies.

Group Communication Principles

The nine group communication competencies are: define the problem, analyze the problem, identify criteria, generate solutions, evaluate solutions, maintain task focus, manage interaction, manage conflict, maintain climate.

Key Terms

Competent group communicator 26
Motivation 28
Knowledge 28
Skill 28

Problem-oriented competencies 28
Solution-oriented competencies 28
Discussion-management competencies 28
Relational competencies 28
Ethics 31

Practice Applying and Assessing Your Skill

Review the discussion of the nine core small group communication competencies on pages 28–31. Based on the description of these competencies, rate your skill in using these competencies in a group or a team on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high). At the conclusion of the course, re-assess your competencies.