

MARGOT NORTHEY JANA SEIJTS **Ninth Edition**

IMPACT !

A GUIDE TO BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

MARGOT NORTHEY JANA SEIJTS **Ninth Edition**

Ivey Business School,
University of Western Ontario

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A GUIDE TO BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In the changing world of business, one aspect is constant—the need for good communication. Although the internet and other sophisticated technology have increased the speed and ease of getting in touch with others, the consequences of poor or thoughtless communication can also have more far-reaching, negative impacts. Repeatedly, the daily news reveals how a poorly phrased message by a CEO can damage a company or how an indiscreet email can undermine an employee’s career.

This edition of *Impact* reflects students’ increased use of technology in their day-to-day lives and the expectation that they will transfer this experience to their jobs, whatever the area. It also reflects our increasingly multicultural workplace. Understanding the nuances of a message and the likely perceptions of the reader or listener is vital to success, whether in motivating fellow employees or in responding to customers. Communicating well means adapting to suit the context.

Despite the changes in society and the workplace, the mandate of this ninth edition of *Impact* remains the same: to provide a small, practical book that is easy to read and easy to use. If you are wary about writing or about speaking in public, this book can help you build confidence and competence. It provides advice on putting words on a page or computer screen. It takes you through the steps of planning and producing good letters, memos, and reports. It reveals strategies for attacking common business-writing problems—ways to address different kinds of readers for different purposes. You will learn how to write with a clear, concise, and vigorous style.

You will also discover the occasions when speaking is more appropriate than writing and how to make an effective oral presentation, handle a job interview, or run a meeting.

Good writing and speaking reflect good thinking. The explanations and exercises in *Impact* show how thinking through a task and making informed choices will bring you better results. It’s a practical approach since, after all, business is a practical matter.

Our thanks to the following for their helpful reviews of this edition of *Impact*:

The capable editorial staff at Pearson Education deserves special thanks: Jennifer Sutton, Emily Dill, Kamilah Burrell-Reid, and Lila Campbell. Thanks also go to Shannon Mighton for her research skills in updating information for the text. To the many students in business communications that we have had the honour of working with over the years, we say thank you. It’s your enthusiasm and passion for learning that inspires us. Last but not least, we’d like to thank our families for their continued love and support.

Student Supplements

MyBCommLab. This state-of-the-art, interactive, and instructive solution for business communication is designed to be used as a supplement to a traditional lecture course or to completely administer an online course.

MyBCommLab

Pearson eText. The Pearson eText gives students access to their textbook anytime, anywhere. In addition to note taking, highlighting, and bookmarking, the Pearson eText offers interactive and sharing features. Instructors can share their comments or highlights, and students can add their own, creating a tight community of learners within the class.

Instructor Supplements

These instructor supplements are available for download from a password-protected section of Pearson Canada's online catalogue (www.pearsoncanada.ca/highered). Navigate to your book's catalogue page to view a list of available supplements. Speak to your local Pearson sales representative for details and access.

Instructor's Manual. The Instructor's Manual offers a practical, hands-on approach designed to help you plan your communications course. The manual provides helpful answers and sample responses to the exercises in the book, suggestions for generating class discussion and group work, and ideas for student self-directed learning.

PowerPoint Presentations. The PowerPoint slides offer an introduction and overview of key concepts from each chapter. They are a great tool for lectures and can be customized for your course.

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Note to Instructors

Since most students are adept at using the internet and a variety of Web-based programs, this ninth edition of *Impact* focuses less on the technology itself and more on the possibilities and pitfalls of using technology to communicate. The primary emphasis remains where it is most needed—on how to write and talk with clarity, conciseness, and force. We have updated many of the examples and exercises and listened to the advice of instructors who have used the book. The design of this new edition is more dynamic and inviting with the addition of colour and photographs but maintains the clean look of previous editions. We think you and your students will find it easy to follow and will be able to find what you want quickly. *Impact* has been successful in part because it is deliberately lean. We continue to strive for a practical book that students will want to use and keep. We aim to provide what they need to know in order to be good communicators, without weighing the message down with extra baggage.

Writing and speaking well is challenging, but we hope this edition of *Impact* continues to make the process simpler and the result more satisfying.

About the Authors

Margot Northey was Professor and Dean of Queen's University School of Business (now the Smith School) from 1995 to 2002. Previously she was professor at the Ivey School, University of Western Ontario, and, before that founding Director of the Writing Program at the University of Toronto. She has also been a visiting professor at the Helsinki School of Economics.

Dr. Northey is the author of many articles and books, including *Making Sense: A Student's Guide to Writing and Style*, now in its eighth edition, *The Haunted Wilderness: The Gothic and Grotesque in Canadian Fiction*, and *Writer's Choice*. She has served as a consultant and given communications seminars to business and government organizations from coast to coast and previously was on the Board of Directors of the International Association for Business Communication and of the International Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. She has also served as a Director on eight corporate boards and many not-for-profit organizations.



Margot Northey

Jana Seijts is a lecturer in management communications at the Ivey Business School and a lecturer in engineering communications at the Faculty of Engineering at Western University. She has over 20 years' experience teaching professional and technical writing and oral communication courses at the university level. She has also taught courses at both Red River Community College and Fanshawe College in the general education program. Prior to arriving at Ivey, Ms. Seijts was the coordinator and English language specialist at Writing Support Services from 2000 to 2009 at Western. In 2000, she started Canada's first summer university transition program in academic writing.



Jana Seijts

Ms. Seijts is the co-author of *A Concise Guide to Technical Communication*, first and second Canadian editions. She is also the author of numerous business cases in management communication and general management. Most recently, her case studies "When the Twitterverse Turns on You" (March 2014) and "Who Should Take the Fall?" (July/August 2015) were featured in the *Harvard Business Review*.

Finally, Ms. Seijts is a technical and professional communication consultant and has given communication workshops and seminars to numerous national and multinational organizations, including J. D. Irving Limited, Lanxess Inc., Toronto Hydro, Ontario Power Authority, Tangerine, CIBC, Agricultural Bank of China, AVIVA, Skanska, and Aecon Group Inc. She is a regularly invited speaker to postsecondary institutions and conferences (most recently, Stanford University and The Management Communication Association) and often gives talks with such titles as *The Generations in the Workplace*, *Reach Your Potential: Designing Winning Proposals*, *Impactful Public Speaking*, *Storytelling for Leaders: Winning Hearts and Minds*, and *Delivering High-Impact Pitches*.

1 Thinking about Communication



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Learning Outcomes

Kanina Blanchard

Certified Management Consultant

Because I've had job titles that include responsibilities in Asia, Europe, and North America, and I carry a passport containing colourful visas and stamps from countries as diverse as India, Germany, Russia, and Kuwait, some might think that cross-cultural communication is one of my core competencies. Hearing that I've lived in Canada, the United States, and Switzerland; worked in Brussels and Hong Kong for extended periods; and travelled for pleasure to many of the countries not part of my professional profile leads some people to comment that I must be adaptable and adept—a global citizen or a cultural chameleon.

What I know is that I have been privileged to experience and explore the world as I have so far and that I share with those who have similar life stories a deep understanding that opportunities to engage internationally come with immense learning, are eye-opening and often humbling, and sometimes include humorous exchanges and the occasional embarrassing moment. In a world that continues to shrink, where technology grows unabated and complexity is the daily norm, the gift of human communication remains a critical differentiator for those seeking to resolve issues, break down barriers, make progress, and succeed in business.

There is no silver bullet in communication, especially across cultures, languages, and geographies. What there must be, however, is the recognition that no title, no pedigree or professional profile, makes one a master communicator. It takes care, attention, and respect for those you will approach and engage; it takes self-awareness, courage, and humility to try, fail, apologize, and try again to create an environment where there is trust and a willingness to work together. It takes communication.

Source: Kanina Blanchard, CMC Management Consultant. Used by permission.

This chapter of *Impact* will help you to

1. understand the role of writing in the business world;
2. learn about written and oral communication systems;
3. identify downward, upward, and lateral communication;
4. avoid potential barriers to effective communication;
5. understand the effect of globalization on business communication;
6. develop strategies for effective intercultural communication;
7. understand the importance of nonverbal communication;
8. develop skills to become an effective listener and questioner;
9. avoid common email problems.

The prospect of having to write fills many business people with dismay. Owing to the emphasis on quantitative methods in business courses, many students and recent graduates have had little practice writing or speaking formally. As a result, some feel more at ease working with numbers than with words. Yet the ability to communicate effectively is essential in getting to the top in business.

The Importance of Writing

Why is writing so important? The reasons can be summed up in three words: flexibility, power, clarity.

Writing Gives Flexibility

Let's imagine you have an idea for a new product that you want to propose to the managers in the marketing and production departments, two busy and more senior people. You make appointments to see them. First you go to the marketing manager's office and enthusiastically make a brief presentation. Unfortunately, she has had a bad day. The president has come down to see her about declining profits, the latest sales figures are discouraging, and she has just concluded a heated discussion with a major distributor. She responds half-heartedly, makes a few nitpicking points, and, while politely showing you to the door, vaguely says she'll think about your proposal.

When you talk to the production manager, he is even more distracted. He says one of the expensive new robots in the factory has malfunctioned, causing a production crisis. He apologizes, saying that he is really too busy to think about new ideas at the moment. You leave, feeling unhappy and defeated.

Now, let's imagine you had put your ideas in writing. The two managers could have set your proposal aside to read at a time when they were feeling less harassed. One might even have taken it home to study quietly in the evening. Since the managers would have been reading the proposal at their convenience, they would have been in a more receptive mood—ready to see your suggestion as a possible benefit rather than another headache.

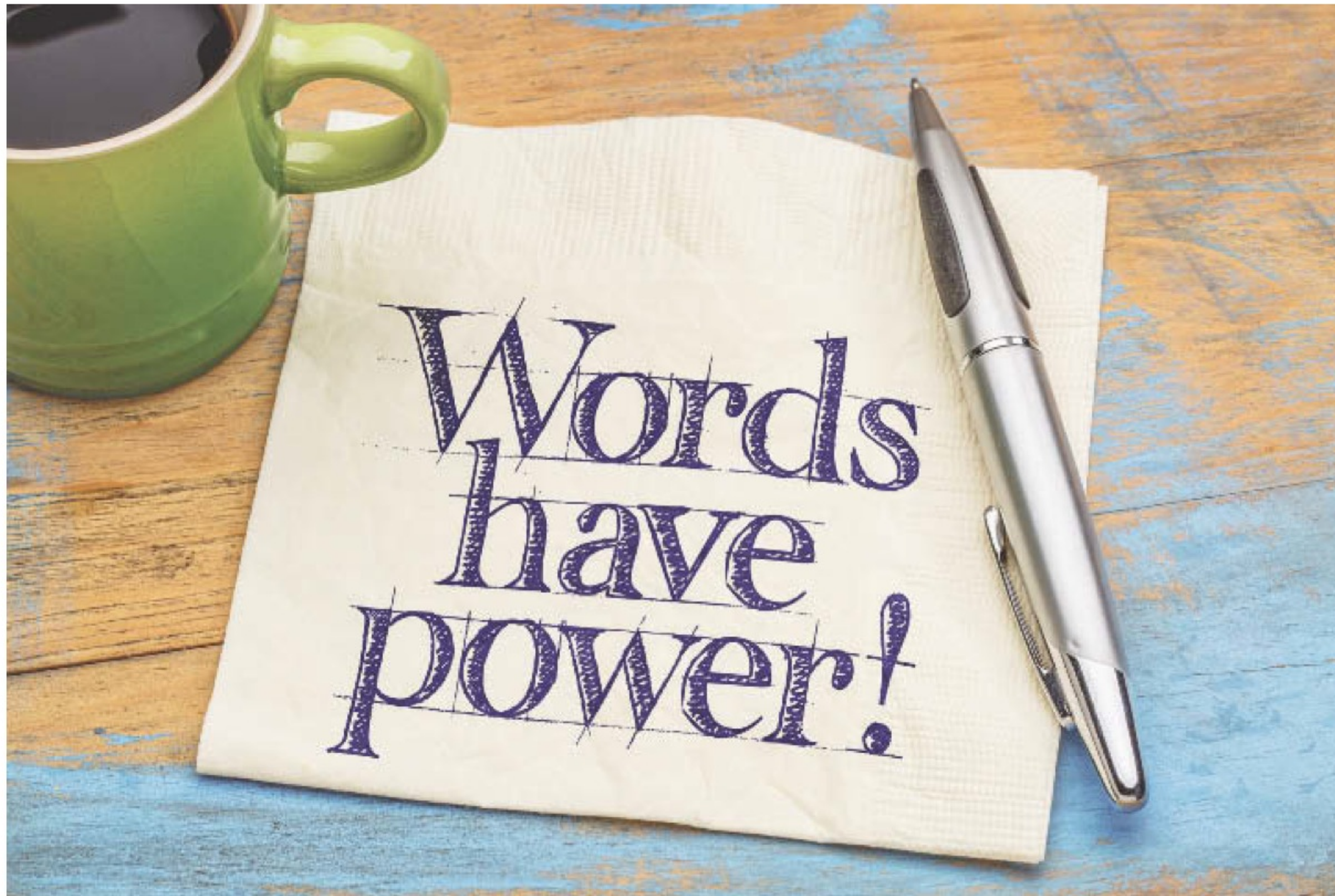
Writing allows this kind of flexibility. It allows readers to decide when and how much they want to read. They have a chance to reread if necessary and to reflect upon a message or proposal.

Writing Has Power

The old saying “The pen is mightier than the sword” suggests the enormous influence the written word has had over people, both individuals and groups. Martin Luther's 95 theses, which ushered in the Protestant Reformation, or Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, laboured over in the damp rooms of the British Museum, have had more influence than the armed might of most rulers. On an admittedly far less profound level, writing in a business setting can also be a powerful force.

To begin with, writing has staying power. Often a written proposal or report will be archived because it is ahead of its time or not in line with current policy. Later, sometimes several years later, when conditions are more favourable, the same document can be picked up and made the basis for company action. To stay alive, the spoken idea relies on memory—a notoriously unreliable vehicle—whereas the written word needs only an adequate filing system. It provides a permanent record.

Writing also has travelling power. Young employees of medium-to-large businesses are sometimes surprised to discover that a memo or report they have written has made its way into the president's office before they have. With the ease and access of computers and the internet, clearly written ideas and information often travel quickly up the corporate ladder. It is not unusual for good writing to catch the eye of a senior manager and lead to quicker promotion for the writer.



Marek/Fotolia

Writing Helps Clarify Thinking

Writers often say that the act of putting things down on a page not only records what they have in mind but also helps them sort out their thoughts. Many people who are struggling with a problem or trying to make a decision find that writing it down encourages them to be logical and arrive at a satisfactory solution. You may have heard the expression “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” Writing aids thinking.

You will find—or may already have found—that you can analyze complicated business problems more clearly when you sort things out on paper. Beyond being a medium of communication, therefore, writing becomes a tool for understanding. It’s a tool worth learning to use well.

Communicating in Organizations

It’s perhaps not surprising that Marshall McLuhan, the most influential communications expert of the twentieth century, was a Canadian. As a nation, we have been preoccupied with forging communication links among a sparse, widespread population. Year after year we strive to maintain a national radio system that reflects the diversity of our country and builds bridges between regions and two linguistic communities. We also fight hard to maintain our television broadcasting system in the face of pervasive foreign competition.

Canadian companies, such as Research in Motion (RIM), have aggressively entered the international high-tech market with newly developed telecommunications equipment. But even high-tech companies have come to realize that excellence comes not only from technological know-how but also from strong people management. Good managers are usually good communicators, whether the process of communication is formal or informal.

Communication Systems

As they expand, most businesses create systems or mechanisms for communicating both inside and outside the organization with people who are important to their success. Shrewd managers strive to set up an effective communication system, not as an end in itself but because it's a way of improving overall performance and capitalizing on opportunities.

WRITTEN SYSTEMS

Internal communication is designed for company employees. Email is the most common route, but company intranets, online team chat groups, and face-to-face group meetings also play a part. Today's businesses realize the need for two-way communication between management and staff. Human resources departments, if they are doing their job, are active in seeking feedback from employees and ensuring that they have a voice in the workplace environment.

The aim of external communication is to inform the organization's outside stakeholders (including shareholders, governments, customers, and the public at large) through various written and spoken communications. Building good relations with the media also matters. The growth of public relations departments illustrates the increasing dependence of business on a favourable public image—and the recognition that an organization cannot operate in isolation.

ORAL SYSTEMS

Conversations over coffee, spontaneous meetings, and even casual access to the boss's office down the hall all contribute to an informal communications network. By “wandering around,” managers contribute to the sense of openness within the company and help create an environment where employees can voice their concerns and ideas.

The grapevine is a major source of information in most organizations. News about hirings, firings, or layoffs is apt to reach people first through the grapevine rather than through formal channels. Grapevine information may be distorted or based on rumour, but it always travels fast. Managers can learn who the key people in this informal network are and make use of them. They can also anticipate what's likely to spread by rumour and give the official version first.

More organized oral communication can occur in meetings or through teleconferencing, either internally among different branches of a single corporation or externally among people in locations around the world. Today's technology adds a new dimension to oral communication by allowing people to “meet” without having to travel to a common location, and teleconferencing has become increasingly attractive in light of the expense and inconvenience of air travel.

The Flow of Information

Whether communication is channelled through formal structures or an informal network, employees have information needs that must be met if they are to continue giving their best. Roger D'Aprix, managing director of D'Aprix & Co., LLC, suggests that employees want answers to three questions:

1. How am I doing and does anybody care? (The need for personal evaluation.)
2. How are we doing? (The need to know group or company performance measures.)
3. How can I help? (The need to contribute meaningfully.)

Managers who are good communicators ensure that those who report to them have answers to these questions. However, creating good communication in an organization isn't a one-shot effort. Rather, it's a continuous process that requires an ongoing management commitment.

The annual list of Canada's Top 100 Employers, compiled by Mediacorp Canada Inc., bases its rankings in part on communication issues: whether the firm lets employees know if they are performing well, and whether the firm passes on news and information to its employees.

An organization with good communications has an efficient flow of information in three directions: downward, upward, and lateral.

DOWNWARD COMMUNICATION

This flow of communication follows the hierarchical route from superior to subordinate. It may take place at any level. Top executives use this route to explain corporate strategies, to instill loyalty, to recognize success, and to rouse employees to greater effort. Lower-level managers often give job instructions, details of policy, and feedback about employee performance.

Downward communication is often serial—that is, it is transferred from person to person through several levels. The more links in the chain of command it passes through, the more distorted it becomes.

According to Pace and Boren (1973), serial communication has several tendencies:

- The original message can become simplified, with some details such as qualifiers omitted and the remaining parts highlighted or “sharpened.”
- Some details are changed according to the predisposition, communication style, or status of the interpreter.
- The order and details of events are adapted according to what is plausible. What one expects to have happened overrides what actually happened.

Serial communication is more likely to be distorted if it is oral, but changes in meaning can occur in any message. A good practice, therefore, is to monitor important messages—to check on how they have been received after passing through several levels—so that any distortion can be corrected.

UPWARD COMMUNICATION

Communication from subordinate to superior can increase productivity and help create a team feeling. Yet too many companies only pay lip service to it. Participative management, which the Japanese have used so effectively, does not mean that subordinates make all the decisions, but rather that they provide input into the process.

Upward communication takes two forms:

1. Requested feedback to superiors on policies, practices, or performance
2. Unsolicited ideas or suggestions

For either form to work, there must be a climate of trust. Subordinates must feel free to make critical comments or suggest changes without being considered troublemakers. Without a climate of trust, employees will say only what they think the boss wants to hear.

LATERAL COMMUNICATION

This kind of communication moves horizontally across areas that are on the same level in the hierarchy, or sometimes diagonally to a different level. In complex organizations,

such communication helps coordinate activities across functions or departments and can produce a spirit of cooperation. When there is little lateral communication—when “the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing”—departments often operate at cross purposes. Often companies trying to be more productive reduce some of the layers of management. In this “flattening” of the organization, lateral communication becomes even more important, since each manager will have a wider span of control—that is, a greater spread of people to manage.

Some Help from Communication Theory

A growing body of research and theory exists about various aspects of communication, from semiotics (the study of signs) and linguistics (the study of language) to cognitive psychology and persuasion theory. For communication specialists, these are fruitful areas to explore. However, for those of us interested in the individual acts of writing and speaking in business, the most important feature of modern communication theory is its description of communication as an exchange. Rather than thinking of communication as only the delivery of a message, we should think of a process in which the receiver of the message matters as much as the sender.

This idea is not new. The ancient Greeks had at the centre of their education system the art of rhetoric. Students learned various techniques for communicating ideas; they practised ways of swaying an audience to the speaker’s point of view by appealing to both reason and emotion. In more recent times, however, with the Western world’s emphasis on reason, we have tended to overlook the importance of the listener in the communication process. The thinking has often been that since people are reasonable, they will agree with your conclusions, as long as you present them with a reasonable argument. You need concentrate only on the logic of your message.

In the twenty-first century, we know enough to correct this mistaken approach. The insights of psychology have made us realize that human reactions are much more complicated than we once thought. In our dealings with others, a simple reliance on reason will not work. Moreover, the insights of linguistics, especially in the area of semantics, have made us aware that meaning itself is a complex matter. Words do not have a fixed meaning; they are only symbols, and their meaning may differ with different users and in different contexts. The word *cool* means one thing when a meteorologist refers to “a cool temperature”; it has another meaning when a politician bemoans “a cool reception” for his speech; and yet another when a teenager talks about a friend being “cool.”

Modern communication theory builds upon these and other insights in studying the ways we express ourselves. It analyzes communication on several levels, beginning with the individual and extending to the interaction among large groups and cultures. It explores the different ways, verbal and nonverbal, that we communicate with each other, from written messages and oral presentations to gestures and body language.

In a book of this size, it is obviously impossible to explore the intricacies of communication theory; what follows is simply a summary of some of the key concepts that affect our ability to write and speak effectively as individuals in business.

A Communication Model

The most basic way to view communication in the business world is to understand that it is a one- or two-way process in which we have a sender and a receiver. The sender chooses

a medium with which to communicate a message. Usually this medium is verbal, written, or some type of electronic medium. The sender must first encode his or her message and then send it through the appropriate method of communication for the given situation. The receiver receives the message and then must decode or interpret its meaning. If the receiver responds to the sender, it is called two-way communication. Here, the receiver then sends feedback to the sender in the form of a response. The sender must then respond in some way to the receiver, and the process continues until there is a natural conclusion. Figure 1-1 illustrates how the process works. To accomplish a purpose, a sender encodes a message into signals (words, numbers, or pictures) that are transmitted by a channel (for example, fibre optic cables, satellites, telephone lines, radio waves, or the nervous system) and a medium (such as a telephone, magazine, television, computer, or even a voice). The receiver gets the signal either directly, through the ear or eye, or indirectly, through the medium of technological equipment. The receiver decodes and reacts to the message, and in turn gives feedback through the same process of encoding and transmitting a signal.

Barriers to Communication

Interference (sometimes called noise) can disrupt any stage of the communication process. The most common types of interference are technical, semantic, organizational, environmental, and psychological.

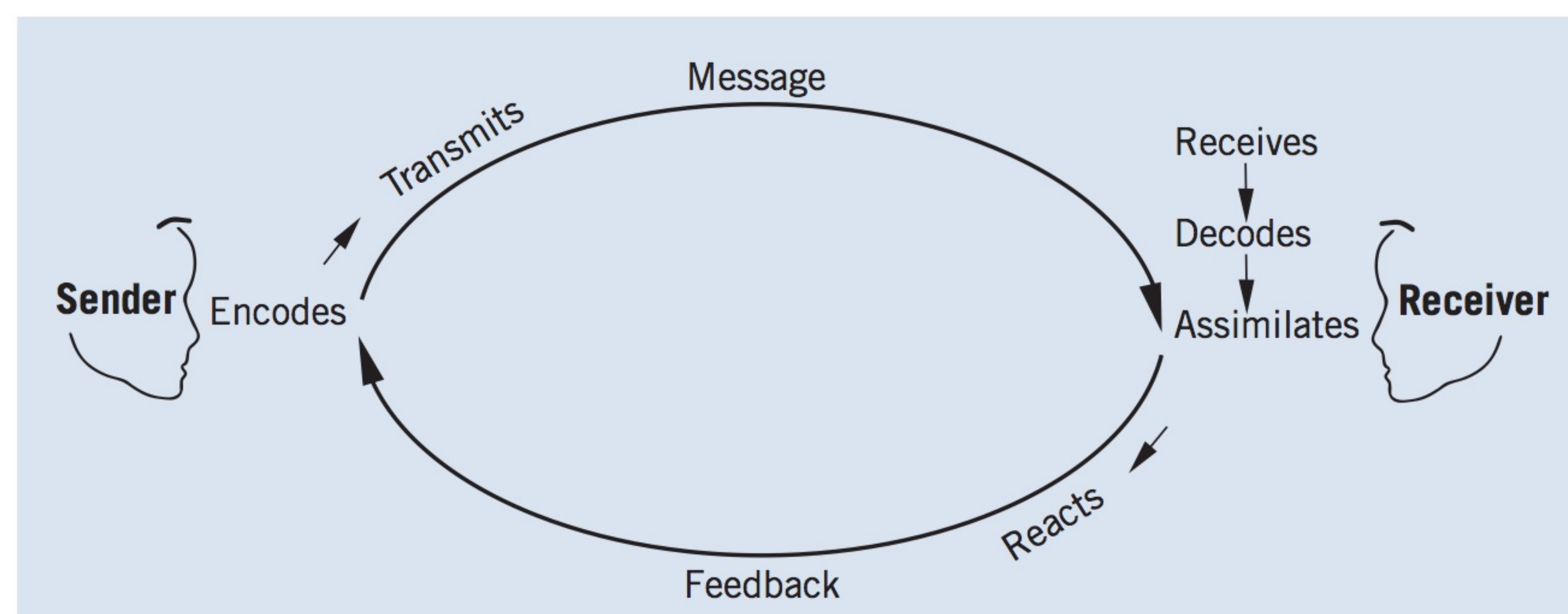
TECHNICAL INTERFERENCE

Most people have experienced static on telephone lines, a breakdown of television transmission, websites or servers that are down, or a computer crash. Some people have to cope with faulty hearing aids or inadequate eyeglasses. We all know that even minor physical ailments can affect communication. If the boss has a headache when sending a memo, the message may be unintentionally abrupt or snappish.

SEMANTIC INTERFERENCE

The problem here stems from words themselves. When faulty language muddles a sentence, the message may be misinterpreted. “Bypassing” occurs when the same word means different things to different people. For example, if you say that management has made an “aggressive” effort to cut costs, you may mean “enterprising” and “vigorous,” but the listener may interpret the phrase negatively as “destructive” or “hostile.”

FIGURE 1-1 A Simple Model of Two-Way Communication



ORGANIZATIONAL INTERFERENCE

Badly structured messages can also be a barrier to communication. Noise can occur at the organizational level when messages are structured in ways that are awkward or overly complex. For example, a receiver who is given unclear, badly worded travel directions might be unable to figure out how to reach his or her destination.

ENVIRONMENTAL INTERFERENCE

Often these barriers have to do with individual or group attitudes. We tend to filter information according to our perception of reality, and that perception may differ from one person or group to the next. In an age when *political correctness* is a catchword in the workplace, it is important to be aware of possible sources of environmental interference:

1. **Age.** The term *generation gap* reflects the fact that a difference in age can cause people to see things in a different light. Teenagers are well aware of this phenomenon when communicating with parents. However, today, with the existence of as many as four different generations in the workplace, the opportunities for miscommunication have never been greater.
2. **Sex.** Jokes or comments acceptable to males may offend females, and vice versa. In addition, perceived sexist attitudes in a message may cloud the reception of a message that ostensibly has nothing to do with sex.
3. **Physical appearance.** The underlying premise of “dress for success” is that people are judged partly by the clothes they wear. We may not like this kind of typecasting by appearance, but it is not likely to go away. If applicants for a job turn up in untidy or inappropriate clothes, they send an unintentional message. So may someone with nicotine-stained fingers, especially if the prospective employer is a nonsmoker.

Interference is not confined to personal appearance. A letter containing typos or an email message containing spelling errors may annoy some readers enough to deflect their attention from the ideas.

4. **Cultural attitudes.** Cultural attitudes, even aside from obvious racial and religious prejudices, can cause interference. Although most groups in our multicultural society share common types of behaviour, we can still see subtle differences based on cultural background. People’s ways of seeing things (their perceptual maps) differ from the ways of others in a different cultural group and can affect the reception of a message. In today’s globalized business environment, an awareness and appreciation of cultural difference is essential to cultivating a successful business.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERFERENCE

Some attitudes can also make communication difficult. For instance, significant frustration or sadness may cause someone to lose focus on the present moment. By acknowledging and adjusting to this psychological noise, a good communicator can make it more likely that his or her message will be received as intended.

The Globalization of Business

Whether a large bank or a small manufacturing company, most Canadian businesses are looking beyond our borders. Two major developments have helped foster globalization:

- **International trade agreements.** Canada has signed a number of national and international trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994),

the Canada–European Free Trade Association Free Trade Agreement (2009), or more recently the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2015), that eliminate trade barriers, facilitate the cross-border movement of goods and services, and increase investment opportunities for Canadian business. These trade agreements have made it easier and less expensive to conduct business in foreign markets, and a new model has emerged with small Canadian firms forming global alliances with similar firms in other countries to establish “virtual corporations.” While the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership could add much value to Canada, ironically, our continued interprovincial barriers continue to hinder trade.

- **International communications technology.** Rapid developments combined with falling communications costs have allowed small Canadian companies to participate in business generated by the globalization trend. Voice technology makes communication easy and accessible through cellphones, handheld computers and tablets, and conference-call technology. Developments in information technology have made it possible to transfer complex information almost instantaneously with ftp, pdf, and zip software and to see and hear others across wide distances. It’s hard to imagine, now, a business world without email, voice mail, video conferencing, and cellphones with built-in cameras.

The Role of Intercultural Communication

An increase in global business opportunities has resulted in a heightened awareness of the need to communicate effectively with people of different cultures. As businesses strive to compete in diverse environments, they have recognized the importance of intercultural communication skills for professional success. Resolving issues across cultural and ethnic differences requires an appreciation of cultural diversity and an awareness of intercultural practices. Each year, it seems, the technology improves and the costs decrease.

For instance, attitudes to time vary from culture to culture. North Americans are generally concerned about being on time. In business, “on time” means precisely at the scheduled hour, perhaps even at the scheduled minute. North American executives who have to cool their heels for an hour in the waiting room of a South American associate could be infuriated about “wasting time” if they didn’t realize that their ideas about time are not always shared by others.

Attitudes to space also vary. Research in proxemics (the study of the space between people) shows that different cultural ideas of what is “private space” may cause communication problems. For example, South Americans and southern Europeans like to move close when they talk to each other. Northern Europeans and North Americans, by contrast, like to keep about a metre apart in business relationships, moving closer only if the relationship becomes more intimate. The British, with their customary reserve, have a reputation for being the most “standoffish.” It’s easy for people from these different cultural backgrounds to give offence unknowingly when talking to one another by moving in during a conversation or by backing away.

Attitudes toward the internet can also reveal cultural differences. A request for digital photographs and biographies of business partners or staff may meet some resistance from Latin Americans, who are reluctant to share personal information with people they do not know; North Americans, on the other hand, tend to see this type of exposure as a good promotional tool.

Email messages, too, can show cross-cultural differences. Asians commonly adopt a very formal tone, writing email messages that are similar to written letters and include openings and closings. North Americans, with their commitment to speed and efficiency, often forgo these formalities. Moreover, students and younger workers sending text messages are used to an even more casual style with shortened spellings and abbreviations, although these are inappropriate in business.

Different cultures practise varying business etiquette and communication styles when negotiating business deals. Canadians are known for being polite listeners but are more than willing to voice their opinions in a give-and-take approach while negotiating. They strive to reach an agreement that is acceptable to everyone and do not mind interjecting humour when appropriate into an otherwise serious conversation. In contrast, negotiators from Hong Kong tend to voice their opinions in a rather matter-of-fact way that can be interpreted as abrupt. In reality, they simply prefer to forgo pleasantries and strike a deal with little debate (Lewis, 2005, pp. 190–191, 499).

Bridging cross-cultural differences has become a fundamental ingredient of successful business communication. When diversity issues are involved, the following guidelines will prove helpful in enhancing communication, both written and spoken.

Writing across Cultures

1. **Avoid the temptation to sound sophisticated or intellectual.** Choose words that are common and may well be included in the English lexicon of a non-native speaker of English. For example, try *rank* instead of *prioritize* or *make* instead of *implement*.
2. **Stay away from any slang or colloquial expressions.** Terms such as *headhunter* or *bean counter* might create some unintended confusion.
3. **Avoid complex, inverted sentence structures.** It is harder for the reader to interpret the message when a sentence begins with an introductory clause. Try to use simple syntax that places the subject and verb at the beginning of the sentence.
4. **Don't use acronyms, contractions, or abbreviations.** What might be common knowledge to a North American may well be unknown to an Asian or European reader. Writing the phrase in full diminishes the need for any guesswork on the part of the reader.

Speaking across Cultures

1. **Watch for signs of confusion or lack of comprehension.** Use the nonverbal communication cues discussed below to assess whether your message is being understood.
2. **Be an active listener.** North Americans have sometimes been told that they have a tendency to talk too much. Be sure to allow ample opportunity for others to ask questions or verify information.
3. **Be a sensitive listener.** People from different cultures may have an imperfect understanding of English, but this is not a reflection of their thinking. Be sensitive to what is underneath their struggles with your language.
4. **Remember that gesture and facial expression are the most commonly understood means of communication.** A smile or a raised eyebrow can say a great deal, bearing in mind the cultural differences discussed below.

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Safir Jamal

Global Brand Manager, Gillette at Procter & Gamble

I'll never forget the time I was asked to present a new brand strategy to a group of Gillette executives in São Paulo, Brazil. This was a big moment for my career, and the company was flying me down to put our best foot forward. I couldn't mess this up. Upon entering the boardroom where the executives were waiting, I immediately extended my hand in front of me, ready to give out some of the firmest handshakes of my life. Instead, my arm was awkwardly caught between my body and that of a female executive whose natural instinct was to greet me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. That's the Brazilian way—an embrace to greet, even in a business context. Needless to say, I took on this “Brazilian way” when greeting the other female executives, but a quick refresher on intercultural communication would have spared me some potentially career-limiting embarrassment!

Source: Safir Jamal, Global Brand Manager - Gillette at Procter & Gamble. Used by permission.

Nonverbal Communication

Many of the difficulties mentioned above are nonverbal. Although the primary focus of this book is verbal communication, it's important to recognize the part that nonverbal communication plays.

One research study has found that a whopping 93 per cent of the effect of a message on a listener is conveyed by nonverbal means (Mehrabian, 1981). Although the influence of nonverbal elements is certainly less in written communication, presentation still matters. Layout, use of illustrations, typeface, and colour can affect reader response, as experts in direct mail know.

Psychologists have shown that people learn in different ways. For many, visualizing (seeing pictures, charts, and so on) is the primary means of understanding. For others, hearing words and music has a major effect. Still others learn best when they do—by imitating motions or working with their hands. If you think back to your early years in school, you will likely remember that teachers often tried to communicate using all three approaches. If we know a person's favoured learning style, we can often emphasize the preferred method in planning communication.

Nonverbal communication can be classified in various ways, but it falls most easily into two divisions: setting and gesture.

Setting

The colour of an office or its decor can be an important element of communication. For example, we know that green, which used to be so prevalent in hospitals, helps create a relaxed atmosphere. By comparison, red, a feature in the decor of many restaurants, is a stimulant.

The way furniture is arranged can also affect communication. Managers who want to emphasize their status can do so by talking to others from behind an imposing desk. Managers who want to put visitors at ease will move from behind the desk and talk in a conversation area where chairs are arranged more casually. Similarly, if the person

chairing a meeting sits at the head of a long table, he or she will more easily dominate the discussion. In contrast, a circular table will encourage conversation among all the participants.

Gesture

Kinesics is a field of research that explores the science of gestures. It has given us helpful insights into the messages people send by using their bodies in particular ways. We all react, often unconsciously, to the signals that people send by their expressions or actions. If we are in the middle of making a point and we see that our listener has raised eyebrows, we infer that he or she has doubts. Similarly, we interpret a frown or scowl as a negative reaction. We wouldn't take long in an argument to move away from a clenched fist or to interpret a handshake as a sign of a truce.

In a North American context, smiling and head nodding communicate a positive response, as do relaxed, open body positions and forward leaning. Eye behaviours, too, are an important element in nonverbal communication. People who avoid eye contact during a conversation are perceived as being ashamed, embarrassed, or even liars, while those who maintain direct eye contact are thought to be more honest and competent (Goman, 2014). Vocal cues are another factor in nonverbal communication: rapid speech is often interpreted as a signal of intelligence and dominance, while a slower rate is perceived as more honest, people-oriented, and benevolent (Nolen, 1995, p. 49).

However, it is important to allow for individual and cultural differences in behaviour. In trying to develop our unconscious understanding of nonverbal signals to the level of conscious interpretation, we should remember two provisos:

1. **Individuals may not fit a common pattern.** Just as racial stereotyping distorts the truth about individuals, so does the reliance upon a single, prescribed interpretation of a gesture. For example, a listener's crossed arms often signify opposition, but they may also be just a comfortable position. To be interpreted reliably, a specific gesture needs to be considered in context.
2. **Gestures can have different meanings in different cultures.** When people in Western cultures nod their heads up and down in a conversation, they are generally showing agreement. For some Africans, the same nod means disagreement. For Asians, nodding means "I understand"; it doesn't mean that your listener is in agreement with the point you are making. Looking a person in the eye also has varied meanings. A young person in most Western cultures is coached to look an adult in the eye as a sign of respect. However, a young North American Aboriginal or West Indian may be taught that this is disrespectful.

As a communicator, you can make many gains by being receptive to nonverbal signals as long as you are aware of their limitations. The key to nonverbal communication is to be observant and sensitive to subtleties. Remember also that the better you know people, the more likely you are to be able to "read" them correctly.

Becoming a Good Listener

Listening is probably the most underrated of all the communication skills, probably because it seems so easy. Yet a common complaint from subordinates about managers at all levels is that they don't listen.

Often a manager's poor listening behaviour reflects the old notion that a manager's job is to tell others what to do and see that they do it. Although good managers do indeed have to spend time talking with others (instructing and advising them), increasingly they recognize the need to involve employees throughout the organization in making suggestions and problem solving as a way of improving performance and productivity. Such effective upward communication depends on management's willingness to listen.

What are the guidelines for effective listening? First of all, it helps to understand Carl Rogers's (1995) distinction between passive and active listening.

Passive listening means listening without giving a response, other than the odd nod or show of comprehension. It's appropriate when the talker merely wants to let off steam or muse out loud. *Active listening*, by contrast, creates a constant interaction between speaker and listener. By directly responding to what the speaker says, through comments and questions, the listener helps direct the conversation. An active listener can, in fact, retain control of a conversation.

If you want to be an active listener, according to Rogers, you need to have *empathy*—an understanding of the speaker's perspective and feelings. Empathy is not the same as sympathy or feeling sorry for the speaker, but rather implies awareness. Four kinds of "mirroring" techniques will help you show this awareness:

1. **Paraphrasing**, in which you restate in different words the speaker's point: "You mean . . ."
2. **Clarifying**, in which you ask for a restatement or fuller explanation: "What exactly do you mean by . . .?"
3. **Reflecting feelings**, in which you respond to the emotions behind the words: "It sounds as if you're feeling . . ."
4. **Summarizing**, in which you pull together the speaker's points: "What I hear you saying is . . ."

Beyond mirroring the speaker's remarks, here are some ways to become a good listener:

1. **Stop talking.** Sometimes this is a hard thing for busy managers to do, especially those used to giving orders. Don't be afraid of silence. Give others time to collect their thoughts. If they take time getting to the point, be patient. Don't interrupt to finish sentences for them. Wait until they pause, and then clarify or try to draw them out.
2. **For a lengthy discussion, pick a spot where neither of you will be distracted.** Telephone calls or other disruptions can interrupt the flow of a discussion. Clear your mind of other matters so that you can concentrate on the conversation.
3. **Show by your posture and expression that you are attentive.** Leaning forward, for example, can show concern for the other person, as can facing the speaker squarely rather than turning partly away. Eye contact also helps signal that the listener is attentive, although staring or glaring will certainly not encourage relaxed conversation.
4. **Be open rather than judgmental.** Try not to let preconceptions or biases about the speaker shape what you are hearing. Concentrate on the substance rather than the style. At the same time, try to get some sense of the pattern and direction of the speaker's remarks.
5. **Be alert to nonverbal cues.** The speaker may betray deeper or more conflicting feelings than the words indicate. Nonverbal cues can often alert you to areas where you should probe deeper to find a hidden message.

Sometimes we assess the speaker by the pace of the speech. A fast talker may be impatient with a slow talker, or a slow talker may be suspicious of someone who speaks at a fast clip. The typical difference in speed between “fast-talking” Northerners in the United States and the slower “drawl” of Southerners has affected attitudes in many a conversation. On the whole, a listener who matches the speed of the speaker’s talk will produce a more positive atmosphere in the conversation. There are exceptions, however. For example, people who are upset or excited often talk faster than usual, sometimes at a breathless pace. We can help calm them down by responding in a slower, more moderate way—a technique doctors use with agitated patients.

Listening to Understand

Although much of this discussion about listening involves strengthening relationships with others, there are times when the point of your listening is simply to understand some information, as when you are receiving instructions, finding out background information to a problem, or attending a speech or lecture. Often in these instances it’s useful to take notes, as long as getting down details doesn’t prevent you from catching the overview or “big picture.” Don’t try to put everything into notes unless you are skilled at shorthand or are able to review your short-form scribble immediately afterward. Instead, try to concentrate first on understanding the flow of the talk and the main argument before attending to the details.

It can be helpful to write the speaker’s key points in one column on a page and the examples or justifications in another column to the right. You might also try leaving space at the right of the page to fill in your own comments after the talk. That way, at a later date you can easily review at a glance the speaker’s ideas and your response to them. Personalizing the information will help you to remember it.

Listening as a Critic

Occasionally your task as listener will be to evaluate—to assess the information critically. For example, you may need to assess a sales proposal or respond to an employee’s plea for a change in procedures on the factory floor or work site. The danger here is that you can become so intent on finding weak spots or problems that you don’t really hear what is being said. Sometimes your own biases and emotions can get in the way, so that you unwittingly “tune out” the speaker’s message. In either case, the result is distortion or misunderstanding.

Instead, try to concentrate on coming to a full understanding before reaching evaluative conclusions. Brief note-taking can help. You might also jot down beforehand questions that are central to your assessment, so that after you are sure you have understood the presentation you can use them as a guide for your evaluation. If you have only a general idea of what the topic will be, here are some basic questions that can help you evaluate:

- What is the main strength of this idea?
- Are there any factual errors or distortions?
- Is the point of view balanced? Is there an underlying bias?
- What are the alternatives to the proposal, and have they been adequately considered?
- What are the short-term and long-term implications of the ideas?
- How could the ideas be implemented practically? What are the barriers to their implementation and could they be overcome?
- As a result of this speech, what needs to be changed, re-examined, or explored further?

Remember that a speaker cannot talk as fast as your brain can process the information. There's a lot of "empty time" when, as a listener, you can be easily distracted. A more useful alternative to daydreaming is to use that time to review or summarize the sequence of ideas, to consider implications, and to anticipate where the talk is heading. It's worth reiterating, however, that your first duty, even as a critic, is to listen carefully to what is being said.

Approaches to Questioning

Effective questioning clearly fits hand in glove with effective listening. Asking the right questions helps us reach the right answer or solution to a problem. Some kinds of questions ease the flow of communication; others hinder it. This list illustrates the effect of different kinds of questions:

1. **An open question** allows the receiver to respond in a variety of ways. It often begins with "How," "Why," or "In what way." It helps to probe the listener's opinions, eliciting a thoughtful or in-depth reply:
 - How can we improve this setup?
 - Why do you think this is a problem?
 - In what way will this affect our performance?
2. **A closed question** asks for a limited response—often yes or no. It's useful for getting specific information or for checking the accuracy of something:
 - Are you saying you'd like more support?
 - Should we mail the report?
 - Have we covered all the dimensions of the issue?
3. **A hidden assumption or "loaded" question** makes it difficult for the receiver to answer without admitting something. It's a trap that puts the receiver on the defensive, and journalists often use it to try to get business leaders or politicians to acknowledge an error or weakness. Clearly, it impedes free-flowing communication:
 - Why haven't you done anything to stop this massive pollution?
 - Is it really that difficult to keep costs down?
 - When will we get a report from you without mistakes?
4. **A hypothetical question** asks "What if?" It is a useful sort of question when people are doing free-form planning or trying to think up creative ways to address an issue:
 - What would you do if your budget were cut by 15 per cent?
 - If you were in charge of this group, what changes would you propose?

On the other hand, a hypothetical question can be troublesome if it is directed at you as a kind of accusation. A question such as "If your product is found to contain dioxin, what do you intend to do about it?" leads away from the known facts to supposed ones and can deliberately inflame an issue.

5. **A two-part question** is really two questions in one. It can confuse, or make it difficult for the receiver to know which part to answer:
 - How should we react and is this really the whole problem?
 - How can we better deploy our sales force as well as increase our promotional efforts?

The questioner would be better to split the question and ask each part separately. Following these guidelines will help you get the feedback you need promptly and efficiently.



Internet Issues

Today, email is the norm in businesses and organizations of any size. It encourages people to communicate more frequently and respond more quickly. Using email, some people feel free to make suggestions or take the initiative; they are more comfortable keying a message onto their computer screen than they are dealing with another person face to face. While computers are liberating, don't let the electronic environment lure you into some common pitfalls. Here are a number of guidelines for using email effectively:

1. **Remember the human side.** This is the cardinal rule of communicating in an electronic environment. Just as you visualize your reader when you are writing a letter, remember the intended recipients of your email and imagine their responses to your message.
2. **Be succinct.** The ease of keying in text makes it all too common for writers to become unusually long-winded when they sit down at a computer screen. As most of us know, having to wade through lengthy emails is tedious and will certainly not help to make your reader more receptive to your ideas.
3. **Avoid short-form symbols.** Although smiley faces and other typographical and spelling short forms common in text messaging work with friends, keep your business writing free of them. They undermine the seriousness of what you are communicating.
4. **Pay attention to appearance and format.** The environmental interference discussed in this chapter is often overlooked in the speed and haste of electronic environments. Take the time to spell check, edit, and proofread your outgoing email to avoid the embarrassment of seeing a mistake just after you click "Send."

Do remember, though, that spell checkers aren't foolproof. They often cannot identify a "commonly misused word" (see Appendix) that is spelled correctly but used incorrectly, and they often don't identify grammatical problems.

5. **Consider privacy, a growing concern for many people.** Privacy cannot be taken for granted in any computer-based communication, whether a brief text message to a friend or colleague, or an email. Skilled hackers can find almost anything. More than one aspiring politician or office seeker has discovered that a casual comment to a friend has been uncovered decades later, causing embarrassment or shame. It's best to assume that nothing sent by a computer is ever completely private.

Despite this caveat, if you are sending a message to a group of people, you may want to put individual recipients' names in a "blind carbon copy" (bcc) so that their identities are not immediately revealed.

Nowadays, text messaging is common practice for informal communication in business. By design, a text message must be short. As a result, writers often use symbols or emoticons (such as "smileys") and compact spelling (such as *u* for *you*). These are perfectly acceptable short forms among good friends, but to business colleagues they may seem inappropriate and even childish. It's best to avoid them. If the message is long, send an email instead.

Voice mail does not have the same technical restraint on length. However, in the interest of a busy listener, brevity matters. Keep to one topic and only the essential details.

EXERCISES

1. Analyze two company publications, such as brochures, magazines, or newsletters. How do the contents improve internal communications, whether upward (employees to management), downward (management to employees), or lateral (among equals)?
2. Popular cartoons and comics in the daily newspapers often focus on communication problems. Find one or two such cartoons or comics and analyze the interference in the communication process.
3. Give a brief outline or a one-minute talk describing the oral and written communication skills needed in one or two of the following jobs:
 - insurance sales representative
 - doctor
 - computer programmer
 - internal corporate accountant
 - store manager
 - payroll and benefits supervisor
 - affirmative action counsellor
 - bank manager
 - administrative assistant
 - receptionist
4. For each of the following scenarios, identify the nonverbal message being sent and indicate if the sender and/or receiver should handle the matter differently:
 - a) While you are talking to a client, she starts drumming her fingers on her desk.
 - b) You are a new employee attending your first group meeting. When a man arrives after the meeting has started, others stand up to offer him a chair.
 - c) When you make a suggestion at a group meeting, a colleague rolls her eyes.
 - d) You need to speak with the internal controller. When you enter his office, you see that he sits with his back to the door, facing the window. He motions you to sit down and continues working for a minute before turning to face you.
 - e) At a meeting you've requested with your boss, she closes the door after you've entered and forwards all calls to her assistant.
 - f) A prospective employee sits facing you. She hunches her shoulders, fiddles with her ring, and bites her lip throughout the interview.
 - g) You hear there is a new engineer your age down the hall and go to his office to welcome him. While you sit talking to him across his desk, he continually rocks back in his chair and presses his fingers together in a "church steeple" position. He smiles with his mouth but not his eyes.
 - h) Three days after you have reprimanded an employee, she refuses to look you in the eye when you meet in the corridor. She returns your greeting in a clipped voice.
 - i) On your work site, a supervisor doesn't respond when you mention the email you sent about a possible environmental hazard.

5. Identify the mirroring technique shown in each of the following conversations:

a) “When I suggested that idea, no one responded, but when Beth suggested it, the same people were enthusiastic.”

“You feel that you don’t count?”

b) “The problem with this project flows from the group dynamics.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

c) “I mentioned he was a good prospect two weeks ago, and no one has contacted him yet. It’s the same with other leads. We have to get more action.”

“You want us to follow up on leads a lot faster.”

d) “This department can’t handle the workload. Management wants us to increase the number of direct mail campaigns and add to the number of special events. We can’t possibly do all this with our present resources. We’re strapped in this department, and if they’re going to keep dumping stuff on us like this we need a lot more money.”

“To do the added work effectively, you need an increase in the departmental budget.”

6. It is Monday morning, and you have promised to have a draft report ready for your supervisor to look at. The truth is that you had some distractions over the weekend and you don’t have the draft ready. You consider trying to get your supervisor to agree to a new deadline by asking

a) an open question

b) a closed question

c) a loaded question

d) a hypothetical question

e) a two-part question

Draft one question of each type. Which is likely to be the most effective? What response would you expect to each question?

7. Suppose that in some organization you belong to—such as a business, an athletic team, a social club, a student group, or a volunteer group—you have been asked to help hire a part-time employee. Create a list of four or five attributes needed to do the job well. For each attribute, create an open question for candidates that will help reveal whether they have that attribute.

8. Select a partner, and each of you take careful notes during a lecture you both attend. A day or week later, review your notes together. Do they still make sense to each of you? Did you miss any important points? Could they be better organized or laid out so that key ideas stand out from less-important details? Have you made any evaluative comments, personalized the ideas, or considered practical implications beyond those presented by the speaker?

9. Analyze the barriers to communication in the worst classroom in your school or the worst room in your office building. Compare these conditions with those in another area of your school or office where communication is easier and more effective. Consider the size, shape, and colour of the room, as well as the lighting, seating arrangements, furniture, acoustics, and other influences.

10. Increasingly, businesses are aware of the importance of public relations and fostering a good corporate image. Examine the advertisements in a mass-market business publication (for example, *Canadian Business*, *Enterprise*, or *Report on Business*), paying attention to those that are not selling a specific product. Assess three or more advertisements. What do you think is the particular message of each ad, and what perceptions on the part of the reader is it trying to influence or correct?
11. Think of someone you have worked for in any organization (perhaps a business, a school, or a volunteer group). Analyze the effectiveness of communication between you and the other person. Consider these questions:
 - What direction did the flow primarily take?
 - How formal or informal was the communication?
 - How at ease were you in the communication and why?
 - How relevant was this communication to your concerns about the job?
 - To what extent did the organization foster good internal communication?
12. Give a three-minute oral presentation or write a few paragraphs discussing how one or more of the following changes might affect business communication, either inside the organization or with the public:
 - increased decentralization in business
 - increased business competition from China
 - greater job security provisions in contracts
 - affirmative action programs
 - promotion or recognition of multicultural goals
 - increased public suspicion of corporations
13. Select two people in the class who hold opposing views on an emotionally charged political or social issue, for example, private medical clinics, mandatory retirement, legalization of marijuana, or patients' right to die. Have them present their views to the class, and then have everyone write a brief assessment of the discussion. Compare your assessment with that of others in the class. Are there differences? Does the listener's own bias account for some of the differences? To what extent does this exercise reveal barriers to communication?

Then, select two more opponents to discuss a different issue. Listeners should merely summarize the side of the argument they least agree with. Compare summaries. Are the differences fewer or greater than in the first part of the exercise? Why? To what extent does the tendency to evaluate interfere with the listening process? In what business situations might this tendency hinder effective communication? What are the possible remedies?
14. Singly or in a group, through research or visits, compare the process of communicating in a fairly small company (up to 100 employees) with that of a large one. Consider the downward, upward, and lateral flow of communication. Try to draw some conclusions about the different communication needs in a large organization as opposed to a small one.
15. Think of a possible improvement in your program or work site. Consider why it matters. Reflect on a potential objection from the person to whom you want to address it. Then, write a short email message that makes your case to a specific boss or person in authority.