APPLYING COMMUNICATION THEORY

for

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

A Practical Introduction

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Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life

Fifth Edition

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BRIEF CONTENTS

DETAILED CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book is designed to serve as a communication theory textbook for upper-level undergraduate and master's degree students. Although it is intended for upper-level students, we make no presumption that the students have previous knowledge or background in communication or communication theory. Rather, the text is meant to serve as a practical introduction to the topic for students pursuing (or currently working in) careers in communication-related industries.

We have found that the primary challenge of instructors teaching communication theory to career-oriented students is the abstract nature of the topic; many students have difficulty seeing the relevance of communication theory in their professional lives. Our goal for writing this book is to make communication theory tangible to students by explaining the theories in practical ways and by assisting students in seeing how theory can be used in professional life. The response to previous editions of this book has been overwhelmingly favorable, and we are grateful to have achieved our goal.

This fifth edition is a major revision of the textbook. We have eliminated the chapter on individual and social approaches to communication (although not necessarily the theories from that chapter) and included a new chapter on strategic communication theories. Also, the chapter on mediated communication is substantially revised. In total we have included eight new theories and brought back a theory from the second edition of the book. We have also modified seven of the case studies based on reviewers' feedback and the changes made in the chapter in which the case appears.

As relevant, modifications or changes to theories have been included, and new research that uses those theories has been incorporated. Popular culture references have been updated as well. Given the increasingly divergent political rhetoric in the United States, we have sought to provide appropriate and balanced political examples. Finally, thanks to feedback from the faculty who have adopted this text as well as the reviewers, we have adjusted the learning objectives for each chapter, we have added a box summarizing the main points of each theory at the beginning of the chapter, and we have included discussion questions.

As a reminder to instructors and students, this textbook is not meant to provide a comprehensive survey of all communication theory, nor is it meant to focus only on particular contexts of communication. Instead, we have selected representative theories that have clear applicability to communication practitioners. To illustrate that there are many more theories for each context, we also have included a box in each chapter highlighting some additional theories for that context. Finally, we have not limited ourselves only to theories developed in the communication discipline because we believe all theories that address communication—whether developed within the field or not—are important tools for communication professionals.

1 INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION THEORY

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

1. Analyze a definition of communication, articulating the definition's level of observation, intentionality, and normative judgment

2. Identify the various contexts in which communication takes place

3. Describe the nature of communication competence

4. Discriminate between commonsense, working, and scholarly theories

5. Use the criteria for evaluating theory to determine the relative usefulness of a communication theory

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If you Google© the phrase "communication is easy," you will find over 6 million pages, with over 600,000 video hits for the same phrase. Of course, if mastering the communication process really only required viewing a 4-minute video, we would all be maestros of getting our messages understood. Unfortunately, much of popular culture tends to minimize the challenges associated with the communication process. Yes, in the 21st century, we believe communication skill is important—you need only to peruse the content of talk shows, dating apps, advice columns, and organizational performance reviews to recognize that communication skills can make or break an individual's personal and professional life. Companies want to hire and promote people with excellent communication skills (Beaton, 2017). Divorces occur because spouses believe they "no longer communicate" (Dutihl, 2012). Communication is perceived as a magical elixir, one that can ensure a happy long-term relationship and guarantee organizational success. Yet, despite lauding communication as the *sine qua non* of contemporary success, the secret to that success is treated superficially at best in our modern information environment. Clearly, popular culture holds paradoxical views about communication: It is easy to do yet powerful in its effects, simultaneously simple and magical.

We believe the communication process is complex. "Good" communication means different things to different people in different situations. Accordingly, simply adopting a set of particular skills is not going to guarantee success. Genuinely good communicators are those who understand

the underlying principles behind communication and are able to enact, appropriately and effectively, particular communication skills as the situation warrants. This book seeks to provide the foundation for those sorts of decisions. We focus on communication theories that can be applied in your personal and professional lives. Understanding these theories—including their underlying assumptions and the predictions they make—can make you a more competent communicator.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

This text is concerned with communication theory, so it is important to be clear about the term **communication**. The everyday view of communication is quite different from the view of communication taken by communication scholars. In the business world, for example, a popular view is that communication is synonymous with information. Thus, the communication process is the flow of information from one person to another (Axley, 1984). Communication is viewed as simply one activity among many others, such as planning, controlling, and managing (Deetz, 1994). It is *what* we do in organizations.

Communication scholars, on the other hand, recognize communication as more than just the flow of information. In a simplified world in which a short YouTube clip could explain to viewers why communication is "easy," we could handily provide you with a one-sentence definition of the term *communication*. Based on that simple definition, we would all understand the meaning of the term, and we would all use the term in exactly the same way. However, scholars disagree as to the scope of the process, whether a source or receiver orientation should be taken, and whether message exchange needs to be successful to count as communication. Back in 1976, Dance and Larson reported 126 published definitions of the term *communication*. The variations in the definitions were profound. Table 1.1 highlights the ways the definitions varied.

In looking at the multitude of definitions of communication, Dance (1970) identified three variations. First, Dance argued that definitions varied based on the **level of observation**, which he described as the scope of what is included in the definition. For example, Dance (1967, as reported in Dance & Larson, 1976, Appendix A) defined communication as "eliciting a response through verbal symbols." This definition limits what is considered communication in two ways. First, it limits communication to only that which elicits a response. Consider an example where

TABLE 1.1 ■ Ways Definitions Vary		
Differences in Definitions	**Stance**	**Taken**
Level of observation: *Are there limitations on what counts as communication?*	**Narrow**	**Broad**
	Yes	No
Intentionality: *Do only messages sent consciously and on purpose count?*	**Source**	**Receiver**
	Yes	No
Normative judgment: *Does the message have to be successfully received to count as communication?*	**Evaluative**	**Nonevaluative**
	Yes	No

you instruct a coworker to fill out a particular form. If that coworker doesn't respond in any way, by this definition, communication hasn't occurred. The second way this definition limits communication is in saying communication is only verbal. So, if your coworker gives you the "okay" gesture when you've asked her to fill out the report, her response to your request would not be considered communication, as it was purely nonverbal. Definitions that make such limitations are said to have a relatively narrow level of observation; only specific types of message exchanges "count" as communication. These types of definitions might suggest messages that don't meet the requirements to be considered communication are *informative* rather than *communicative.*

Other definitions, however, try to be very inclusive about behaviors that might be considered communication. To illustrate, another definition identified by Dance and Larson (1976) says communication is "all of the procedures by which one mind can affect another" (Weaver, 1949, as cited in Dance & Larson, Appendix A). Notice that this definition does not give any indication of whether the mind is of a human, an animal, or even an alien (if there are such things). More importantly, it suggests *all* behavior can count as communication. Such definitions are considered to have a broad level of observation. As such, the first way to differentiate between theories is to consider what "counts" as communication.

A second distinction made by Dance (1970) is the stance the definition takes on **intentionality**. Some definitions explicitly indicate that for communication to occur, the exchange of messages has to be on purpose. For example, Miller (1966) defined communication as "those situations in which a source transmits a message to a receiver with conscious intent to affect the latter's behaviors" (as cited in Dance & Larson, 1976, Appendix A). Definitions such as this are said to take a **source orientation**. So, for example, if your boss were to yawn while you gave a presentation, this definition would not consider the yawn as communication if your boss did not yawn on purpose (i.e., if she yawned as a physiological response to tiredness rather than to suggest you were boring her).

However, other definitions take a **receiver orientation** to communication. Such definitions buy into the notion that "you cannot not communicate"; anything you say or do is potentially communicative, regardless of whether you intended to send a message or not (see Watzlawick et al., 1967). For example, Ruesch and Bateson (1961, as cited in Dance & Larson, 1976, Appendix A) say that "communication does not refer to verbal, explicit, and intentional transmission of messages alone. . . . The concept of communication would include all those processes by which people influence one another." In this case, if you (as the receiver) were to interpret your boss's yawn as a message of boredom, it should be considered communication, regardless of whether the boss intended to send that message or not.

The final way Dance (1970) argues that definitions of communication vary is **normative judgment**, which is a focus on whether the definition requires an indication of success or accuracy. Some definitions would suggest that even if people misunderstand each other, communication has still occurred. Berelson and Steiner (1964), for example, say communication is "the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc., by the use of—symbols—words, pictures, figures, graphs, etc. It is the act or process of transmission that is called communication" (as cited in Dance & Larson, 1976, Appendix A). In this case, it is the transmission that is important, not the understanding. So, if a student has no idea what a teacher is talking about, by this definition, communication has still occurred, it just may not have been very effective communication. Definitions like this are said to be nonevaluative.

Other definitions limit communication to only those situations where the receiver and the source share the same understanding after the communicative effort. These definitions, identified as being evaluative, require shared meaning in order to be considered communication; unsuccessful messages are not considered to be communication. To illustrate, Gode (1959, as cited in Dance & Larson, 1976, Appendix A) defines communication as "a process that makes common to two or several what was the monopoly of one or some." This definition suggests that if the message has not resulted in a common understanding, communication has not occurred. In the example of student–teacher interaction described earlier, if the student doesn't understand the teacher, then by this definition the teacher has not communicated. They may have lectured, cajoled, or presented, but they have not communicated.

By now you understand some of the complexities of the nature of communication. Throughout the book, different theorists likely use different definitions of communication. Sometimes these variations in definition will be obvious, sometimes they will be less so. For example, the systems interactional perspective (see Chapter 8) spends a great deal of time articulating the nature of communication. In so doing, it becomes clear that this theory takes a broad level of observation, a receiver orientation, and is nonevaluative. Alternatively, Aristotle's theory of rhetoric (Chapter 6) focuses specifically on persuasive speaking and provides techniques for persuasion. As such, this theory has a narrow level of observation (focusing primarily on oral, persuasive communication), the focus is on intentional acts (a source orientation), and its focus on ethical versus unethical communication makes it evaluative in nature.

CONTEXTS OF COMMUNICATION

Although we hesitate to provide a single definition of communication, we can identify some specific contexts of communication. In fact, we have organized this book around these specific contexts. The first context that requires consideration is the cognitive context, by which we mean the influence our thoughts have on the way we communicate. Second is the interpersonal context, which refers to the interactions between two individuals, who most often have a relationship with each other. Third is the intercultural context, which focuses on interpersonal communication when two people are from different cultures. The fourth context is not specifically focused on a setting for communication but on a particular type of communication: the persuasive context. Readers should know that persuasion actually takes place in a variety of settings, ranging from inside one person's mind to the mass media. In fact, many communication professions focus on persuasion, which is why the fifth context is aligned with strategic communications: the creation of messages to achieve organizational goals. The sixth and seventh contexts also are closely aligned with the world of work: the group context and the organizational context. Then, the eighth context is the mediated context, which is concerned with how technology influences our interpersonal, group, and organizational communication. Finally, the ninth and final context is the mass communication context, which focuses on the influence of mass-mediated messages. Table 1.2 provides an overview of these contexts and the theories covered in this text that are associated with each context.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Contexts of Communication	
Context	**Theories**
Cognitive	- Message Design Logics - Uncertainty Reduction Theory - Expectancy Violations Theory - Planning Theory
Interpersonal	- Politeness Theory - Social Exchange Theory - Dialectical Perspective - Privacy Management Theory
Intercultural	- Hofstede's cultural dimensions - Communication accommodation theory - Co-Cultural Theory - Social Role Theory of Gender
Persuasion	- Aristotle's Theory of Rhetoric - Narrative Paradigm - Social Judgment Theory - Elaboration Likelihood Model
Strategic Communication	- Theory of Planned Behavior - Extended Parallel Processing Theory - Inoculation Theory - Situational Crisis Communication Theory
Group	- Systems Interactional Perspective - Functional Group Decision-making - Groupthink - Symbolic Convergence Theory
Organizational	- Organizational Culture - Organizational Assimilation - Organizational Identification and Control - Organizing Theory

(*Continued*)

TABLE 1.2 ■ Contexts of Communication (continued)	
Context	**Theories**
Mediated	• Channel Expansion Theory
	• Social Information Processing Theory
	• Uses and Gratifications Theory
	• Spiral of Silence
Mass Communication	• Agenda-Setting Theory
	• Cultivation Theory
	• Social Cognitive Theory
	• Encoding/Decoding Theory

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Because we believe one of the goals of studying communication theory is to make you a better communicator, we should articulate more clearly the nature of **communication competence**. Research indicates that communication competence is most often understood as achieving a successful balance between effectiveness and appropriateness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). *Effectiveness* is the extent to which you achieve your goals in an interaction. Consider the many different goals an individual might have in their personal and professional lives. Personally, you might have the goal of initiating a new relationship, or persuading your boss to give you a raise. Professionally, you might have a goal of increasing social media engagement with your company or boosting rates of vaccinations among a target demographic. If you achieve these goals, you have been effective. *Appropriateness* refers to fulfilling social expectations for a particular situation. Did you assertively ask for the raise, or was it a meek inquiry? Were you ethical in your campaign to boost vaccinations, or did you engage in some less-than-above-board behavior? Many times, a person is effective without being appropriate; consider a job applicant who lies on a resume to get a job for which they are unqualified. That person might be very effective in getting the job, but is such deceit appropriate? On the other hand, many times people are appropriate to the point of failing to achieve their goals. For example, a person who doesn't wish to take on an additional task at work but says nothing because they fear causing conflict might be sacrificing effectiveness for appropriateness. The key is that when faced with communicative decisions, the competent communicator considers how to be both effective *and* appropriate. We believe the theories described in this book will help you achieve your communication goals by providing an indication of both what should be done as well as how you should do it.

THE NATURE OF THEORY

The term **theory** is often intimidating to students. We hope by the time you finish reading this book you will find working with theory to be less daunting than you might have expected. The reality is that you have been working with theories of communication all of your life, even if they haven't been labelled as such. Theories simply provide an abstract understanding of the communication process (Miller, 2002). As an abstract understanding, they move beyond describing a single event by providing a means by which all such events can be understood. To illustrate, a theory of customer service can help you understand the poor customer service you received from your cable company this morning. Likewise, the same theory can also help you understand a good customer service encounter you had last week at a favorite restaurant. In a professional context, the theory can assist your organization in training and developing customer service personnel.

At their most basic level, theories provide us with a lens by which to view the world. Think of theories as a pair of glasses. Corrective lenses allow wearers to observe more clearly, but they also affect vision in unforeseen ways. For example, they can limit the span of what you see, especially when you try to look peripherally outside the range of the frames. Similarly, lenses can also distort the things you see, making objects appear larger or smaller than they really are. You can also try on lots of pairs of glasses until you finally pick a pair that works best for your lifestyle. Theories operate in a similar fashion. A theory can illuminate an aspect of your communication so you understand the process much more clearly; theory also can hide things from your understanding or distort the relative importance of things.

We consider a **communication theory** to be any systematic summary about the nature of the communication process. Certainly, theories can do more than summarize. Other functions of theories are to focus attention on particular concepts, clarify observations, predict communication behavior, and generate personal and social change (Littlejohn, 1989). We do not believe, however, that all of these functions are necessary for a systematic summary of communication processes to be considered a theory.

Although similar to at least two other terms, we want to be careful to differentiate theories from other abstract notions. First, a **concept** refers to an agreed-upon aspect of reality. For example, *time* is a concept, as is *love*, the color *orange*, and a *bitter* taste. All of these notions are abstract, meaning they can be applied to a variety of individual experiences or objects and can be understood in different ways. That is, you might love your cat in a different way than you love your mother; you might think time drags when in a class you don't much like but that it speeds up over the weekend; and you might hate the color orange and love the bitterness of certain foods. However, in and of themselves these concepts are not theories; they represent an effort to define or classify something, but they do not provide insights into how or why we experience them in a particular way. Typically, theories provide a way to predict or understand one or more concepts. So, a definition of communication described earlier is a concept, but how that definition is used to explain the communication process is a theory.

A second term you might confuse with theory is a **model**. Part of the confusion you might experience is because the term *model* is used in at least four ways (Gabrenya, 2003; Goldfarb & Ratner, 2008): as a synonym to the term *theory*, as a precursor to a theory (a model is developed and eventually becomes a theory), as a physical representation of a theory (i.e., a diagram such as the one that appears for expectancy violations theory in Chapter 3), or as a specific—often mathematical—application of predication (e.g., a researcher might develop a mathematical model to predict which job categories are going to be in high demand in upcoming years). Because of these varying ways of understanding a model, we believe the term *theory* is preferable when talking about systematic summaries of the communication process.

Of central interest is the importance of theory for people in communication, business, and other professions. Our definition of theory suggests that any time you say a communication strategy *usually* works this way at your workplace, or that a specific approach is *generally* effective with your boss, or that certain types of communication are *typical* for particular media organizations, you are in essence providing a theoretical explanation. Most of us make these types of summary statements on a regular basis. The difference between this sort of theorizing and the theories provided in this book centers on the term *systematic* in the definition. Table 1.3 presents an overview of three types of theory.

The first summary statements in the table describe what is known as **commonsense theory**, or theory-in-use. This type of theory is often created by an individual's own personal experiences or developed from helpful hints passed on from family members, friends, or colleagues. Commonsense theories are useful because they are often the basis for our decisions about how to communicate. Sometimes, however, our common sense backfires. For example, think about common knowledge regarding deception. Most people believe that liars don't look the person they are deceiving in the eyes, yet research indicates this is not the case (DePaulo et al., 1985). Let's face it: If we engage in deception, we will work very hard at maintaining eye contact simply *because* we believe liars don't make eye contact! In this case, commonsense theory is not supported by research into the phenomenon.

TABLE 1.3 ■ Three Types of Theory	
Type of Theory	**Example**
Commonsense theory	Never date someone you work with—it will always end badly. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. The more incompetent you are, the higher you get promoted.
Working theory	Audience analysis should be done prior to presenting a speech. To get a press release published, it should be newsworthy and written in journalistic style.
Scholarly theory	Effects of violations of expectations depend on the reward value of the violator (expectancy violations theory). The media do not tell us what to think but what to think about (agenda-setting theory).

A second type of theory is known as **working theory**. These are generalizations made in particular professions about the best techniques for doing something. Journalists work using the "inverted pyramid" of story construction (most important information to least important information). Filmmakers operate using specific camera shots to evoke particular emotions in the audience, so close-ups are used when a filmmaker wants the audience to place particular emphasis on the object in the shot. Giannetti (1982), for example, describes a scene in Hitchcock's *Notorious* in which the heroine realizes she is being poisoned by her coffee, and the audience "sees" this realization through a close-up of the coffee cup. Working theories are more systematic than commonsense theories because they represent agreed-on ways of doing things for a particular profession. In fact, these working theories may very well be based on scholarly theories. However, working theories more closely represent guidelines for behavior rather than systematic representations. These types of theories are typically taught in content-specific courses (such as public relations, media production, or public speaking).

The type of theory we focus on in this book is known as **scholarly theory**. Students often assume (incorrectly!) that because a theory is labeled as *scholarly* it is not useful for people in business and the professions. Instead, the term *scholarly* indicates that the theory has undergone systematic research. Accordingly, scholarly theories provide more thorough, accurate, and abstract explanations for communication than do commonsense or working theories. The downside is that scholarly theories are typically more complex and difficult to understand than commonsense or working theories. If you are genuinely committed to improving your understanding of the communication process, however, scholarly theory will provide a strong foundation for doing so.

EVALUATING THEORY

Earlier we suggested that all theories have strengths and weaknesses; they reveal certain aspects of reality and conceal others. An important task students and scholars face is to evaluate the theories available to them. We are not talking about evaluation in terms of "good" versus "bad" but evaluating the *usefulness* of the theory. Each of you is likely to find some of the theories presented in this text more useful than others. Such a determination is likely due at least in part to your own background and experiences, as well as your profession. We would like to challenge you to broaden your scope and consider not just the usefulness of each theory to you personally but the usefulness of the theory for people's personal and professional lives in general.

A number of published standards can be used to evaluate theories (e.g., Griffin et al., 2015; West & Turner, 2017). All are appropriate and effective tools for comparing the relative usefulness of a given theory. Because this text is geared toward working professionals, however (or those who wish to soon be working in the profession of their choice), we believe the following five criteria outlined in Table 1.4 best capture the way to assess the relative usefulness of communication theories in the communication, business, and related professions. Note that we are talking about the *relative* usefulness of the theory. We are not talking about either/or, good or bad, weak, or strong. Instead, we hope you look at these distinctions as continua that range from very useful at one end to not particularly useful at the other end.