

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is a dynamic and complex human phenomenon that includes at least two communicators. These communicators intentionally orient toward each other as both subject and object whose actions embody each other's perspectives both toward self and toward other. In essence, interpersonal communication is a goal-driven interaction between at least two people that typically occurs in a face-to-face environment. However, scholarly trends are moving toward studying mediated interpersonal communication via communication technologies. Interpersonal communication in organizations represents an interaction process including a variety of relational situations. These internal situations involve superior-subordinate and peer communication. This article centers on internal interpersonal communication. First, an overview of the process of interpersonal communication will be provided. Second, interpersonal communication is situated in organizations by examining superior-subordinate communication and peer communication. Finally, the process of interpersonal communication is contextualized by reviewing the impact of trust and technology on interpersonal communication in organizations.

THE PROCESS OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The process of interpersonal communication is viewed from a general communication perspective provided by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. This model, in its most basic format, includes the sender, the message, the channel, and the receiver. Noise provides an additional component.

The first two components of interpersonal communication are the sender and the message. The sender mentally composes a message to relay to another person, taking into account the reason, or intention, for sending the message. Perhaps it is meant to persuade, or to inform. The act of transferring this message from thought to words is called *encoding*.

The *channel* in this model refers to the mode of communication used to relay the message. Familiar channels include television, radio, and newspaper. However, interpersonal communication differs from mass communication in this respect because the channel used is face-to-face communication in which messages are relayed through verbal interaction at one location.

The fourth component of this model is the receiver. This person is responsible for taking the sender's message and decoding it. The action of decoding results in the assignment of meaning by the receiver.

The exchange described is one basic unit of interaction between communicators. Once the receiver decodes the message and gives meaning to it, that person can encode another message to relay to the sender. The resulting action is characterized as *feedback*. Feedback helps to clarify the original message or to enhance it. In the feedback process, the original receiver then becomes the sender who encodes the message, and the original sender becomes the receiver who decodes the message. Again, the channel of communication remains face-to-face. This process can continue in a cyclical manner, creating a dialogue between both people.

An additional component affecting the interaction represented in this model is noise. *Noise* refers to anything that could interfere with the transmission of the message from the sender to the receiver, and it can be attributed to a number of sources. Physical sources are often much easier to recognize and would include a loud

truck driving by while the sender was talking to the receiver during a meeting, or if the receiver was having difficulty with his hearing aid while listening to the sender speak.

Noise related to differences in perception can also interfere with the ability for communicators to relay a message. This type of noise is attributed to a number of factors, including nonverbal communication and cultural differences. Differences in perception can lead to conflict among the communicators.

SUPERIOR–SUBORDINATE COMMUNICATION

The supervisory–subordinate relationship is the primary interpersonal relationship structured by the organization. Individuals' relationship with their supervisor is one of the most important communication facets of their organizational life. This relationship is so critical that it may determine how individuals identify with the organization, as well as the individuals' job and organizational satisfaction and commitment. Particularly, the quality of supervisory communication and information exchanges have been linked to revenue and productivity measures of the overall organization.

Most organizations typically have superior– subordinate relationships among organizational members. Generally, research in the area of superior– subordinate interpersonal communication centers on exchanges of information and influence between organizational members, at least one of whom has formal authority, granted by the organizational structure, to direct and evaluate the activities of other organizational members. Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn suggested that superior to subordinate communication typically centers on information regarding organizational procedures and practices, indoctrination of goals, job instructions, job rationale, or feedback on performance. Similarly, subordinate to superior communication typically focuses on information about the subordinates themselves, their colleagues, and their work-related or personal problems; information about tasks to accomplish; or about organizational policies and practices.

A. F. Smith and S. A. Hellweg found in 1985 that subordinates are more satisfied with their work when communication between subordinate and supervisor is good. A strong predictor of subordinate satisfaction is the superior's ability to listen, respond quickly to messages, and be sensitive, empathic, and understanding. V. R. Waldron and M. D. Hunt further posited in 1992 that subordinates reporting high-quality relationships with their supervisors were more likely to engage in informal, friendly interactions with their supervisors, to conform to formal and informal requests, to attempt to clarify expectations, and to accept criticism from supervisors than were individuals reporting lower-quality relationships.

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory frequently informs superior–subordinate relationships. The LMX theory has been linked to a variety of communication behaviors and suggests that leaders have limited time and resources and share both personal and positional resources differently with their subordinates. In sum, Jaesub Lee and colleagues suggested in 1999 that leaders tend to develop and maintain exchanges with their subordinates that vary in degrees of quality. These relationships range from high (in-group) to low (out-group) exchanges. Ingroup exchange is considered a high-quality relationship reflected by high levels of information exchange, mutual support, informal influence, and trust, and greater negotiating latitude and input in decision influence. Alternatively, out-group exchange reflects a low-quality relationship characterized by formal supervision, less support, and less trust and attention from the supervisor.

RESEARCH ON SUPERIOR–SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIPS

There are several areas of research examining issues of superior–subordinate communication. These include the following:

- **Interaction patterns.** Research that studies the communication patterns between supervisors and their subordinates. How much time is spent communicating with each other? Who initiates the communication? What is the importance of the interactions?

- **Openness in communication.** This line of research examines two dimensions of openness in the superior-subordinate relationship: message sending (delivering bad news, candor in communication, providing important company facts) and message receiving (encouraging frank expressions of alternative views).
- **Upward distortion.** This occurs when persons of lower hierarchical rank in organizations communicate with persons of higher rank. Upward distortion falls into four general categories:
 1. Subordinates tend to distort upward information, saying what they think will please their supervisors.
 2. Subordinates tend to filter information and tell their supervisors what they, the subordinates, want them to know.
 3. Subordinates often tell supervisors what they think the supervisor wants to hear.
 4. Subordinates tend to pass personally favorable information to supervisors while not transmitting unfavorable information about themselves to supervisors.
- **Upward influence.** This line of research focuses on two dimensions of influence: (a) the effects a superior's influence in the hierarchy has on his or her relationships with subordinates and (b) subordinates' use of influence with their supervisors.
- **Semantic-information distance.** This research describes the gap in agreement and/or understanding on specific issues between superiors and subordinates (e.g., job duties and leaders' authority).
- **Effective versus ineffective superiors.** Examines prescriptive characteristics of effective and ineffective communication behaviors among organizational supervisors, as well as communication qualities of effective leaders.
- **Personal characteristics.** These study the mediating effects of personal characteristics of superiors and subordinates (e.g., communication apprehension, communication competence, locus of control, and communicator style).
- **Feedback.** Research focusing on relationship between feedback and performance, feedback and motivation, feedback and attributional processes, the use of rewards and punishments as feedback, and the feedback-seeking behavior of individuals.
- **Conflict.** Research examining the role of communication in superior-subordinate conflict (e.g., conflict management style, organizational level, power, perceptions of skills, perceptions of subordinate's personality).

Peer Communication

Peer communication is an important interpersonal facet in everyday organizational life. This area of study focuses on coworker communication within and between work groups. Peer communication is important for three reasons:

1. Peer interpersonal communication differs from superior-subordinate communication (e.g. relationship rules, message strategy choices).
2. Peer communication and the use of groups to accomplish work goals in organizations is increasing.
3. Peer interpersonal communication is an important source of support, friendship, and job satisfaction and commitment.

Peers communicate about job requirements, provide social support, and are in a position to give advice without formally evaluating performance. Peers also may help each other solve organizational problems or issues and utilize the best strategies to use with supervisors. However, peer communication is not without problems. Peers can withhold information from one another, which makes accomplishing individual and group goals difficult.

Research on Interpersonal Communication in Organizations

Interpersonal communication is complex. It is a difficult proposition to communicate effectively with others while maintaining an authentic sense of self. Communication may be difficult with others owing to the wide array of interactions on a regular basis. Communication partners have different interpersonal communication experiences that contribute to how they communicate and interact with others. Exposure to multiple communication partners can be confusing if one is not familiar with recognizing and adjusting to different styles and patterns of communication.

Several factors contribute to the interpersonal communication process in organizations. They include interpersonal trust, the use of nonverbal communication, cultural differences between the partners, and technology in interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal Trust in Organizations

The role of interpersonal communication in the development of relationships is a popular area of study for communication researchers. Interpersonal communication may occur between people who have had continual interaction or between people who do not have past experiences with each other, allowing a reduction in drawing on a historical frame of reference. Regardless of the interpersonal situation, trust is a critical factor in all interpersonal relations. Although a general term, *trust* is defined as positive expectations about the behavior of others based on roles, relationships, experiences, and interdependencies, as noted by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak in 2002. Shockley-Zalabak, Kathleen Ellis, and Ruggero Cesaria discussed in 2000 the central role that organizational communication plays in the behavior components of trust. These scholars highlight three primary areas of organizational trust that strengthens communication:

1. *Accurate information.* Information flow that is forthcoming
2. *Explanations for decisions.* Adequate and timely feedback on decisions
3. *Openness.* Managers and supervisors freely exchange thoughts and ideas with their employees

TECHNOLOGY AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication is typically restricted to communication that occurs in a face-to-face environment. However, with an increase in the use and access of technologies in organizations, mediated interpersonal communication is becoming a salient area of inquiry. Knowledge of interpersonal communication has become more important in recent years, especially as organizations have expanded their activities to other countries and relied on computer-mediated communication to overcome physical distances. The rapidly increasing use of computer-mediated communication to connect members of an organization has resulted in more research relating to both computer-mediated communication and globalization. It raises questions regarding key assumptions of face-to-face interaction and highlights the need to understand interpersonal communication. This higher level of awareness is more likely to produce organizational members who recognize their own and others' communication needs, resulting in communicators who are more effective.

Technology is changing the way we view and engage each other in our relationships. Communication technologies have eradicated boundaries of brick-and-mortar buildings, where face-to-face interactions were predominant, to expand time and spatial restrictions that inform interpersonal and work communication. Individuals accomplish work through various time zones, cultural differences, and particularly geographic locations. Because of this, we work with people without much information about their background, history, or experiences, much less their worldviews, values, and ideology. This may create opportunities for effective interpersonal communication or may greatly hinder it, depending on how well individuals react to this new way of working. Teleworking (individuals who work at home or in other organizationally controlled spaces) and virtual teams (individuals who work as part of a team remotely solely using communication technologies) are new interpersonal communication configurations informed by technology.

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