

Communicating for Managerial Effectiveness

Challenges | Strategies | Solutions

6th Edition

Phillip G. Clampitt

University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

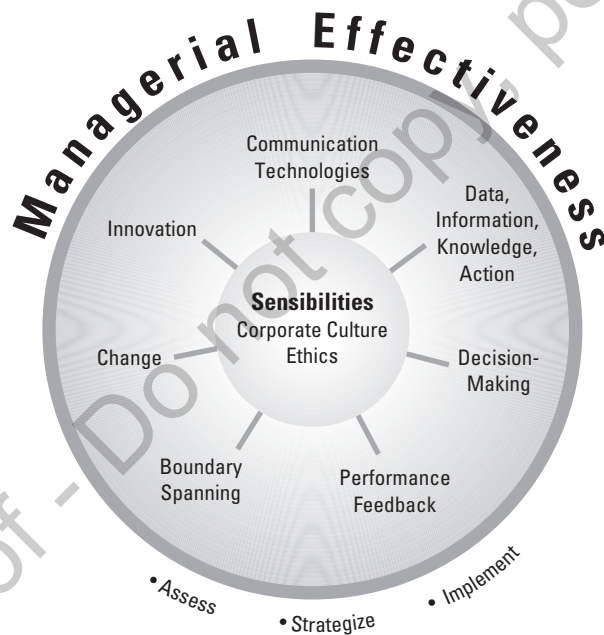


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CHAPTER 1

Understanding Communication



It requires a very unusual mind to make an analysis of the obvious.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Human communication permeates the human condition. Human communication surrounds us and is an in-built aspect of everything human beings are and do. That makes any effort to explain, predict, or to some extent control human communication a pretty big order. How does one get a handle on the totality of human communication?

—Frank Dance

If you were asked to name a dozen modern scientific legends, you probably would not include on your list a meteorologist who doubled as a church organist. Few people realize how George P. Cressman's meteorological ideas have seeped into our everyday lives.¹ Under his tenure as director of the National Weather Service, he introduced computer modeling into the forecasting process and engineered the now commonplace idea of expressing forecasts in terms of probabilities (e.g., 5% chance of fog). Most people spurn probabilities; they want to know with complete certainty whether or not to bring an umbrella to work. Alas! That kind of certainty is not possible, even in the Mojave Desert. And this impossibility applies in equal measure to forecasting weather and communicating messages. This is exactly the issue we will focus on in this chapter. And if it seems a bit strange, so did Cressman's innovative introduction of percentages.

Let me begin by offering a definition of **communication** that we will refer to throughout the book. Communication is the transmission and/or reception of signals through some channel(s) that humans interpret based on a probabilistic system that is deeply influenced by **context**. We transmit by talking, writing, texting, illustrating, and touching. Is this same thing as “transferring,” like transferring funds from one checking account to another? No! We must interpret those signals that we receive by listening, reading, watching, or feeling. Signals can be verbal, nonverbal, or visual. We use an ever-changing array of channels, ranging from face-to-face oral exchanges to text messages, to Facebook posts. Yet, just as knowing about clouds, snow, and fog does not make you a meteorologist, *knowing* the components of communication does not equate with *understanding* the communication process. We need something more. We need something like Cressman's notions about probabilities, models, and context. Therefore, this chapter focuses on seven propositions about communication based on those key notions. And this chapter will serve as a foundation for explaining the transmission, reception, and channel selection challenges reviewed throughout the book.

BLAISE PASCAL

1623–1662

It may well be one of the most remarkable exchange of letters in the history of the world. It is certainly one of the most consequential. The correspondents? Pierre de Fermat, one of the greatest mathematicians of the 17th century, and Blaise Pascal, the “home-schooled” genius, who most consider to be the father of the modern mathematical theory of probability.² The consequences? Keith Devlin, the “Math Guy” on National Public Radio, put it this way:

The ability to calculate probabilities transformed the practice of statistics, changing it from the mere collection and tabulation of data to the use of data to draw inferences and make informed decisions. Without the ability to quantify risk, there would be no liquid capital markets,

and global companies like Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, DuPont, Alcoa, Merck, Boeing, and McDonald's might never have come into being. The pundits and pollsters who today tell us who is likely to win the next election make direct use of the mathematical techniques developed by Pascal and Fermat.³

Pascal began the correspondence with Fermat because he thought he had solved two mathematical problems related to a gambler friend's query about the role of chance in making wagers. But he wasn't sure. So he wrote to Fermat, "I wish to lay my whole reasoning before you, and to have you do me the favor to set me straight if I am in error or indorse me if I am correct. I ask this in all faith and sincerity for I am not certain."⁴ Thus began a remarkable correspondence that created the seeds of probabilistic thinking. While we take probabilistic thinking for granted today, during Pascal's time people took a less sophisticated view of chance. And they certainly never thought about odds or probabilities as tools for predicting the future (e.g., the chance of fog tomorrow) and making decisions (e.g., bringing a raincoat to work).

We don't need to be an amateur theologian, like Pascal, to appreciate his famous "wager" about God's existence. He reasoned that rationally proving (or disproving) God's existence is impossible. Therefore, we must make a wager about God's existence. Since the potential consequences of disbelief are dire, we are better off making a bet on God's existence and living accordingly.⁵ We don't need to know all of Pascal's complex mathematics to think about communication as a probabilistic event; we only need to recognize that we lack certainty when anticipating how others will interpret our messages.

Pascal's conceptual breakthrough was the application of probabilistic thinking to problems beyond just the gambler's dilemma. What are the odds that a Frenchman in the 17th century would discover a fundamental notion that explains the roll of the die, that illuminates a theological quandary, and that crystallizes our perspective on communication?

Propositions

Proposition 1: Communication Can Best Be Described in Terms of Probabilities

Language is inherently ambiguous. We experience the **ambiguity** in the words we use, in the sentences we utter, and in countless communication breakdowns. One researcher says that for the 500 most frequently used words in the English language, there are more than 14,000 definitions.⁶ Take, for instance, the word *run*. A sprinter can "run" in a race. Yet politicians "run" races but not exclusively with their legs. Although a horse "runs" with legs, it uses four of them, whereas sprinters use two. A woman can get a "run" in her hose, which is troublesome, but having a "run" of cards is good. However, having a "run" on a bank is bad. "Running" aground is not

good at all for a sailor, but a “run” with the wind can be exhilarating. To score a “run” in baseball is different from scoring a “run” in cricket. Hence, we “run” into the ambiguity of language at every turn, even with simple, everyday words.

Given the inherent ambiguity of any message, we can assign probabilities to the various interpretations. The statement “I am going down to the bank,” when stripped of all contextual clues, could be seen as having a 50% chance of being interpreted as going to a financial institution and 50% chance of being understood as going to the bank of a river. The communication process *increases* or *decreases* the probability of certain interpretations. Adding the phrase *to deposit a check* clarifies the operative probability. But it is not always that simple.

Communicators who fail to understand the probabilistic nature of interpretations may encounter serious difficulties. An incident at a hospital provides an intriguing insight into the difficulty. A young woman from Green Bay, Wisconsin, was taken to a hospital emergency room for a minor injury at 7:00 p.m. on a Friday night. After the usual name and address part of the intake process, the conversation continued (see Table 1.1).

The nurse walked away in disgust. The patient limped away in pain. Note how the probable interpretations started out one way, flip-flopped, and then reversed again. In the end, neither person recognized the true source of the conflict.

In the beginning (Stage 1), both people had different meanings for the question “How much did you drink?” The nurse was referring to liquids (100% probability), the patient to alcoholic beverages (100% probability). Theoretically, both are plausible interpretations. For the nurse, the term *obviously* meant liquids. After all, the amount of liquid in the human body is a crucial medical indicator. But another context is at work here as well. For many people, on a Friday night, the term *drink* typically means an alcoholic beverage. Nevertheless, eventually each person recognized the “mistake” in the other’s interpretation.

TABLE 1.1 Conversation Analysis

Conversation	Stage
Nurse: How much did you drink? Patient: I haven’t been drinking at all tonight. Nurse: No, no, I mean liquids.	1
Patient: Oh well, I’m not really sure. Normal, I guess. Nurse: OK.	2
Patient: Why did you need to know about how much I drink? Nurse: (caustically) I don’t care how much you party! That’s your business. But I see the results of you kids who drink and drive. It’s not fair to those who don’t. Patient: I didn’t mean alcohol. I meant fluids, I meant . . .	3

The relevant information was extracted in Stage 2, with the patient adjusting to the interpretation of the nurse. Then, in Stage 3, each assumes the other's interpretation, still at a 100% probability, as the operating rule for the conversation. On the surface, this switch appears to be the source of the conflict. Yet on a deeper level, each communicator considered only *one* possible interpretation (a 100% probability) at each stage of the conversation (see Table 1.2). Neither the nurse nor the patient recognizes that *drink* has a probability of meaning *either* "fluids" or "alcohol." Hence, the communication totally breaks down in Stage 3, resulting in frustration for both nurse and patient.

Incidents like this happen all the time because most people do not have a probabilistic view of communication. Yet astute communicators learn to adopt a probabilistic viewpoint and recognize a broader set of implications.

Implication A: Typically, the message sender sees only one possible interpretation. Yet for a receiver, there are three different options. First, the receiver may see the same possibility—in which case, the two individuals understand one another. Second, the receiver may see a different possibility—which may go unnoticed or even be found amusing. Consider the newspaper headline "HERSHEY BARS PROTEST." Are candy bars going on strike and walking the picket line? Third, the receiver may be unable to determine the correct possibility. At this point, a clarifying question may be asked. Or the receiver may choose not to inquire about the precise meaning because the risk of asking exceeds the potential gains. Fears of ridicule, status loss, humiliation, or conflict often stifle further communication. In most large-group situations, for example, the pressures to not ask for clarification can be immense.

CHAPTER 1: BY THE NUMBERS

1.6x
The returns to shareholders generated by companies that communicate effectively versus those that do not communicate effectively

14,000
The number of definitions for the 500 most commonly used words in the English language

51%
of employees are satisfied with organizational communication

3,155,760,000
Robert Hooke's estimate of the number of separate ideas the mind can entertain

83%
of highly effective organizations respond that corporate communication is an essential part of their business strategy

TABLE 1.2 Using Probabilities to Diagnose a Communication Breakdown (in Percentages)

Meaning for "Drink"	Theoretical Probability	Stage 1		Stage 2		Stage 3	
		Nurse	Patient	Nurse	Patient	Nurse	Patient
Alcohol	50	0	100	0	0	100	0
Fluids	50	100	0	100	100	0	100

Implication B: The sender of a message may purposely use language that has multiple interpretations. Some speakers use a kind of verbal Rorschach. The famous Rorschach psychological test presents subjects with an ambiguous graphic: an inkblot. Then, subjects are asked, “What do you see in this image?” Theoretically, the interpretation of the inkblot reveals the subject’s intellectual and emotional orientation. In the same way, statements can be designed that elicit different interpretations depending on the receiver’s orientation.

Politicians provide a plethora of examples: “Our party believes in fiscal discipline.” What does this statement precisely mean? It could mean almost anything. But it sounds good! Corporate executives are not above using such tactics. Consider this statement: “People are the key to our success.” What does this mean? Will the company pay better wages than competitors? Are poor performers going to be fired? It remains unclear. But that does not imply that such statements are useless. On the contrary, such language can be extraordinarily powerful. Even though every person who hears such a statement may have a different meaning for the message, the ultimate effect may be favorable. The receivers read their own meanings into the statements, which might be quite positive. Yet none of the *private* interpretations can be confirmed. Thus, the speaker can forestall conflict, create the appearance of unity, or even allow people to save face. In essence, the ambiguity preserves the speaker’s options. And if need be, the speaker can *publicly* deny any specific interpretations that become problematic. No wonder some people make generous use of the word *maybe* when responding to requests. A “maybe” response protects the sender from being labeled a “promise breaker” even as it allows the person to maintain power in the situation.⁷

Is strategic ambiguity ethical? The question is, in a sense, moot. Ambiguity, regardless of whether or not we acknowledge it, permeates our language. Both ethical and unethical people use such tactics. Ambiguity can stir creative ideas, allow people to save face, or help resolve a conflict. For example, scholars discovered that employees deemed to be effective do not have to actually agree with their managers on the regulative rules guiding conversation. Yet they must be perceived by their managers as agreeing with these rules.⁸ So ambiguity may serve to create the perception of unity, if not the reality. On the other hand, the unscrupulous do use such tactics for deception, power play, and fraud (see Table 1.3). Just ask Pierre Bayard, who wrote a book titled *How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*.⁹ Unfortunately, he’s serious. Ugh! Thus, thoughtful communicators look at their own motives but are also aware of how others might misuse or even abuse ambiguity.

Implication C: The receiver may purposely misunderstand. In some circumstances, receivers exploit the probabilistic nature of communication to meet their goals. In short, they have a need to misunderstand. My favorite example involves the artist who sculpted figurines adorning the top of a prominent building in London. When city officials saw that the building was rimmed with statues of nude males, they ordered the artist to “cut off the offending parts.” The artist complied, but in his own special way. He lopped off the heads of all the statues.

TABLE 1.3 Assessing the Value of Ambiguity

Potential Benefits	Potential Weaknesses
Induces creativity	May not be useful with those desiring specific direction
Allows people to save face	May be used to deny personal responsibility
Resolves conflict through different interpretations of one message	May result in unwanted misunderstanding
Allows people to strategically delay making decisions	May delay conflict resolution
May enhance one's credibility in a conflict	May create ethical concerns
Allows diverse groups to work together	May gloss over meaningful differences
	Allows for plausible deniability

Employees often have a similar need to misunderstand communication they may find “offensive.” For example, on a Wednesday afternoon, a manager sent his employee this memo: “I need the report first thing Monday morning.” Monday rolled around, and lo and behold, no report! The angry boss confronted the employee, whereupon the employee remarked, “I thought you meant the following Monday.” Sure enough, that is one possible interpretation. In fact, the memo could have been referring to any future Monday. No doubt, the employee understood precisely what Monday the boss was referring to. But the extra week of preparation met his needs at the time. The probabilistic nature of communication allowed him to legitimately argue that there was a “communication breakdown.”

Implication D: The receiver may constructively understand a message. Because of the inherent ambiguity of communication, we have choices about what parts of the message we pay attention to and the meanings we construct. While many people do not recognize those choices, they always exist. Skilled communicators make constructive choices. For example, Indra Nooyi, the chief executive officer (CEO) of PepsiCo, learned from her father “to always assume positive intent. . . . You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different.”¹⁰ For instance, an angry or confused person might blurt out an offensive remark that actually masks an important idea or sentiment. By constructively misunderstanding or assuming “positive intent,” you will be able to get at the substance of the matter and cultivate a positive working relationship.

The skillful use of this idea actually prevented a major international incident and perhaps a thermonuclear war. Here's the background. Long before the phrase *weapons of mass destruction* became the threat du jour, there was a distinct possibility that the United States and the Soviet Union would hurl nuclear weapons across the oceans at each other. In 1962, this so-called Cold War heated up very quickly during the latter days of October—“the most dangerous thirteen days in the history of mankind,” according to some historians.¹¹ Reconnaissance

photographs from a U.S. U-2 spy plane over Cuba portrayed a potentially catastrophic threat. The Soviets were constructing 30 nuclear missile-launching sites less than 100 miles from the U.S. coast, which could annihilate millions of Americans in mere minutes.

What was to be done? President Kennedy, ignoring the counsel of some “invade-the-island” advisers, chose another way—a naval blockade of military equipment. And then he waited. What would happen? Two separate communiqués arrived from Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev—the first more conciliatory, the second more threatening. Now what? Presidential counselor Ted Sorensen tells us, “My approach to drafting [Kennedy’s] response was borrowed from an old Lincoln High School debate class technique of taking the other side’s presentation and interpreting it as supporting your own objectives.”¹² In short, Kennedy chose to ignore Khrushchev’s second letter. After some further maneuvering, the missiles and launch sites were removed, averting a catastrophic confrontation between the superpowers. This incident provides a vivid example of the powerful ideas we are discussing.

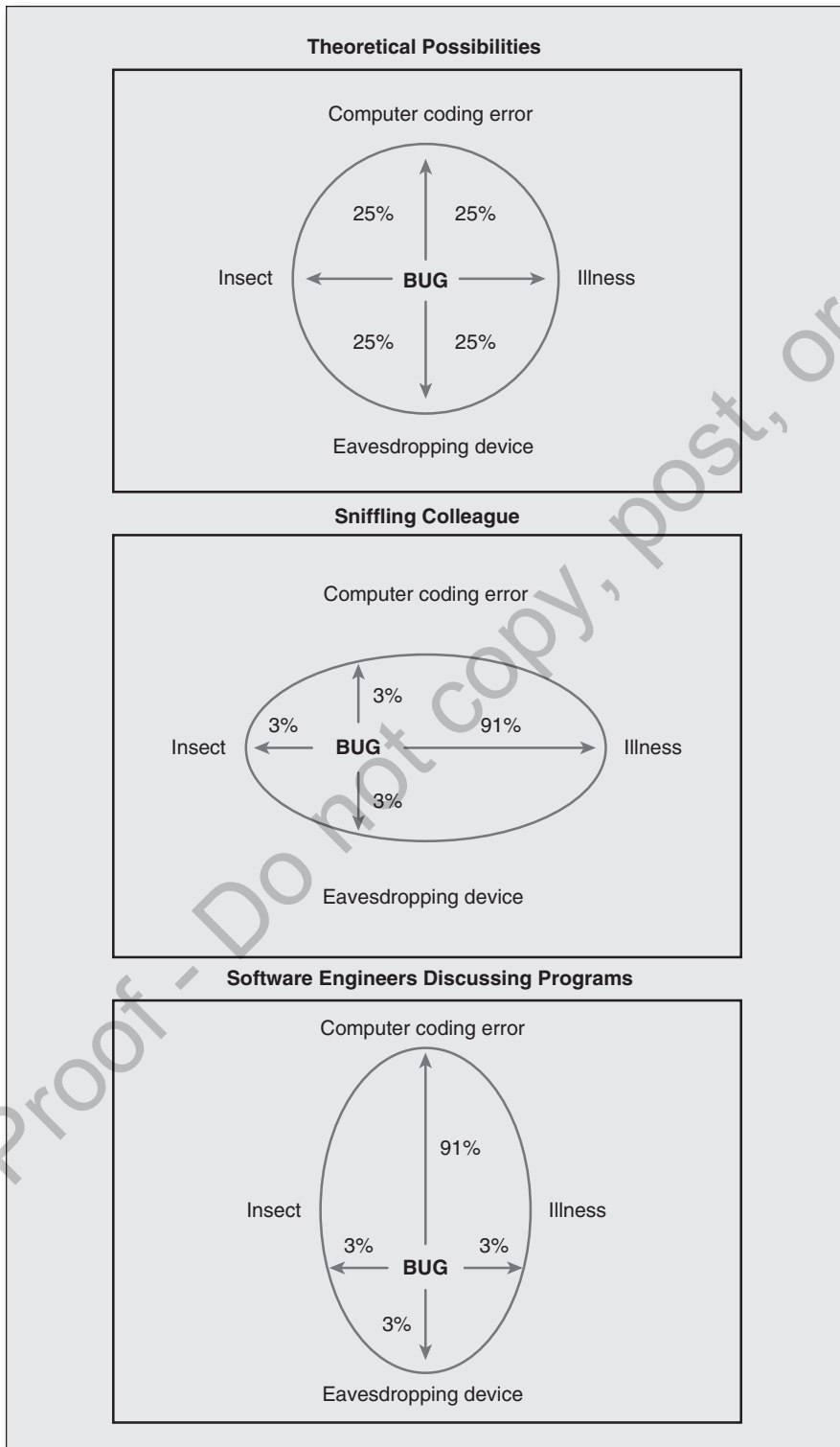
Proposition 2: Context Shapes the Probabilities by Creating Default Assumptions

If ambiguity permeates all messages, then how can two people ever understand each other? In fact, no one can guarantee 100% understanding. However, people do seem to be able to understand one another well enough to get tasks done, communicate intentions, and function effectively in an array of situations. How? In part, the answer lies in the role that context plays in the communication process. The context freezes or predisposes certain probable interpretations.

For instance, the term *bug* has a multitude of possible interpretations. It could stand for an insect, an eavesdropping device, a nasty illness, or a computer coding error. Consider the statement “I’ve got a bug.” Usually, we do not clarify how we are using the term. A sniffing, sneezing colleague need not explain what type of “bug” she is referring to. Likewise, two software engineers talking about their latest program are most likely referring to a coding error. With astonishing ease and simplicity, we understand the various uses of the term, without elaborate explanation. The context of the discussion increases the probability of some interpretations while decreasing the probability of others (see Figure 1.1).

When communicators do not share assumptions about the context, they frequently misunderstand one another. My favorite example occurs in a Peter Sellers movie. Sellers, as Inspector Clouseau, is standing in a street corner with a dog at his side when a stranger approaches him. The stranger asks, “Does your dog bite?” The always forthright Clouseau responds, “No.” Then the dog at Sellers’s side promptly chomps on the leg of the bystander. The astonished man replies with justifiable anger, “I thought you said your dog does not bite.” Sellers calmly replies, “It’s not my dog.” The humor of this episode lies in the incongruity between Sellers’s context of interpretation and the other man’s. The bystander assumed from the physical context that Sellers owned the dog standing by him or, at the very least, that he would know which dog was the point of reference. But the man was wrong on both counts. Inspector Clouseau should have known that the probabilities were shaped by the

FIGURE 1.1 Probabilities Altered by Context



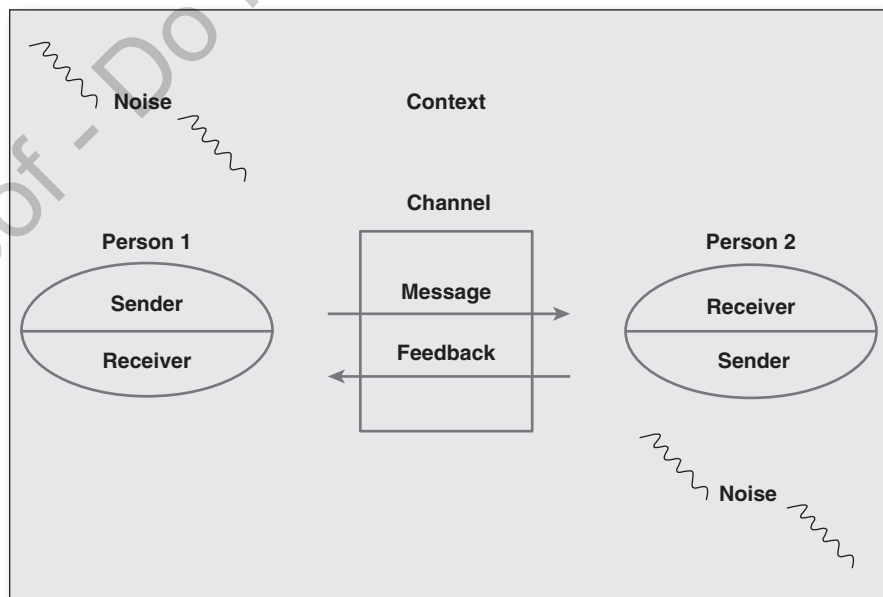
context to exclude references to all other dogs in the world and focus on the dog in sight. But such are the bumbling charms of this character. Yet all incidents of this type are not so easily chalked up to a comic's antics; some are quite serious. For example, a deadline to submit a bid may be missed because the bidder assumes a different time zone from what was intended.

Intercultural scholars have noted that some cultures are more reliant on contextual clues than others. High-context cultures communicate in ways that depend greatly on the shared experiences and relationships of the communicators. The message itself relays little of this contextual information. High-context cultures, such as those found in Japan, Mexico, and Middle Eastern countries, tend to have collectivist values. In contrast, low-context cultures communicate in much more explicit ways and are more likely to formalize agreements. They are comparatively less dependent on contextual clues. Low-context cultures, such as those found in Germany, Sweden, and the United States, tend to stress individualistic values.¹³ Clearly, organizations operating in both cultures have a difficult challenge building an appropriate context. Even communicators in low-context cultures face contextual challenges.

Proposition 3: Context Building Is a Dynamic Process

A unique context emerges as people interact, regardless of the culture. Even thoughtful analysts miss this point. Consider the typical model of communication represented in Figure 1.2. Note that the context is pictured as an element *outside* of the communicators. The implication: Communicators share and operate in the

FIGURE 1.2 A Typical (and Inappropriate) Communication Model



same context. It is as if the context is like air: Everyone breathes it, walks through it, and experiences it in a similar fashion. Therefore, many people assume that context exists *independent* of anyone's presence; it's something "out there." This image is misleading. Situations may be commonly experienced; contexts are not. Context is essentially individualistic; fundamentally, each individual has a personal and uniquely configured context. There is not one context; there are many. A context is not walked into; rather, it permeates our being. It infuses our day-to-day interactions with accurate and inaccurate assumptions, useful and useless interpretations, as well as valuable and valueless sensitivities. Context is not some kind of ever-present ether; rather, it emerges from the complex interactions between people, situations, and personal relationships.

Greeting behavior demonstrates how contexts develop through a dynamic process. Think about the limitless number of possible responses to a question such as "How are you doing?" In fact, the greeter faces an intriguing dilemma when someone actually proceeds to answer the inquiry in burdensome detail. Past experiences in the "greeting contexts" make it virtually certain that the responses will be quite limited. In fact, almost any response to a greeting will be interpreted as a simple acknowledgment because of the contextual rigidity. Some of my students tested out this notion by responding to greetings with wildly inappropriate responses, such as the following:

Greeting (test subject): How's it going?

Response (student): Not so good. My dog just died and a truck ran over my foot.

Reply (test subject): Hey, good to talk to you.

Such inattentive replies were all too typical. Why? People repetitively experience certain roles, under similar circumstances, and in comparable settings. Consequently, a series of probable interpretations are highlighted and others deemed less likely. Therefore, many people play their part in this obligatory ritual without really listening.

The dynamic nature of context building allows for a highly flexible but efficient method to reduce the interpretation probabilities. All comments do not have to be clarified in precise detail for two people to interact effectively. Certain interpretations are *pushed* into the foreground and others *pulled* into the background. Consequently, people can reasonably assume that meanings will be shared, except perhaps when talking to Inspector Clouseau.

Proposition 4: The Context May Act Like a Black Hole

Astronomers, as well as science fiction buffs, have a fascination with black holes. These are places in space in which the heavens collapse into a concentration of supergravity that warps space-time to such a degree that light cannot escape

from it. Celestial objects that get too close to a black hole can get sucked in and never return. Nothing, not even light, escapes from a black hole. In a similar way, a context can exert such a strong force that the probable interpretations can become severely warped. Indeed, the meanings that are inferred can have little or no relation to the actual realities of the situation or the intentions of the sender.

The proverbial tale of the boy who cried “Wolf!” once too often is a case in point. The first time he cried wolf, everyone came running, only to find that it was a ruse. The second time, the same story. The third time, an actual wolf appeared and gobbled the boy up. Figuring it was just another ruse, no one came running to help him. The boy had created a real contextual black hole. The context created by the previous incidents implied that the probable interpretation of “Wolf, wolf!” was that it was a “joke.” The shift of probable interpretations from the first incident to the final episode shows the powerful role that context plays in the communication process. The moral of the story: The context can be so strong that you have no means to communicate your message. In essence, a black hole can destroy the capability for communication.

Unfortunately, the simple lesson of this child’s tale goes unheeded in too many organizations. The situations vary in the particulars but not in kind. Past communication builds a very powerful set of contextual cues. For example, the manager who continually berates an employee but then suddenly praises him may be viewed as trying to placate or appease. The employee may interpret this sudden turn of events like this: “She’s only saying that because she wants a favor.” The manager’s motives are suspect even when offering honest praise.

Contextual black holes can also be a positive force. “Success breeds success,” in part because useful meanings are accentuated by the context, whereas potentially negative ones are ignored. In many ways, the reputation of Microsoft software acts as a positive black hole. Even if a new Microsoft product may be inferior to others, buyers view it positively. One purchasing agent for a major company, keenly aware of the halo effect, said, “No one ever got fired for buying Microsoft software.” The corporate philosophy, past successes, and image all serve to skew meanings in a positive way, regardless of more objective interpretations.¹⁴ In sum, the black hole may act positively, as in the case of Microsoft, or it may function negatively, as it did for the boy who cried wolf once too often.

Proposition 5: Context Construction Is Uniquely Sensitive to Time Sequencing

The message in Figure 1.3 appeared outside a church on its marquee. If these two statements are read as question and answer, sequentially, then this church had a rather unusual approach to piety. Indeed, the humor comes from the fact that the first line was not intended to form the context for the second line. If the statements on the marquee are reversed, the faux pas no longer exists because the context does not necessarily suggest a sequential reading of the sign (Figure 1.4). This amusing incident illustrates a more profound principle. Unlike basic mathematics, communication lacks a commutative property: $A + B \neq B + A$.

The manager who, while reading the *Wall Street Journal*, finds out about his organization's plans to restructure has a completely different perspective on the company from the manager who hears about the plans firsthand. Employees who depend on the grapevine first and the formal network second for accurate information come to different understandings from those who reverse the process.

Message order matters. Each message forms the context for the next message, as one musical phrase does for the next. But it is not quite that simple. Some messages are seen as being connected to one another, whereas others are not. This, too, influences the interpretations. Why some messages are seen in the same context, as was the first church sign, and others are seen in different contexts, as was the second sign, remains somewhat of a mystery. Why do people connect some events or messages and not others? Future communication researchers will have to answer that question. This issue greatly influences our communicative experiences.

Take the case of 9-year-old Wendy Potasnik of Carmel, Indiana. She filed a lawsuit against Borden, Inc. because she did not get her free prize in her box of Cracker Jacks. She wrote a complaint to the company but failed to receive a reply within 12 days. A Cracker Jack spokesperson stated that a letter of apology and a coupon for another box were sent within 13 days, but by then, the suit had been filed. Expectations formed at one point in time became part of the context, which then influenced all subsequent interpretations.

Clearly, silence is not always golden. Some communication scholars extend the argument further, claiming that "you cannot *not* communicate." In practical terms, that quip is nonsense. There are countless people with whom we do not communicate, with whom we do not intend to communicate, and who do not perceive an intent to communicate.¹⁵ Rhetorically, however, this oft-quoted maxim highlights that every person can be seen as a walking grab bag of potential messages waiting to be interpreted. The type of clothing worn, the briefcase carried, the haircut, the accent, and the rate of speech are just a few of the potentially interpretable messages.

Managers may find it disconcerting that, to a large extent, message senders are at the mercy of the interpretations of receivers, regardless of the senders' actual intent. The supervisor who does not respond to a written request from a subordinate, whether by design or carelessness, "communicates" a very important message. The valued employees who do not receive adequate feedback about their performance "read" that they are unappreciated and start searching elsewhere for more desirable working conditions. The marketing representative who fails to return a phone call from a client "sends" a potentially negative message. Discussions about this feature of the communication process are always difficult, messy, and confusing because even the language we use obscures the issues. The term *receiver* only

FIGURE 1.3 Church Marquee A

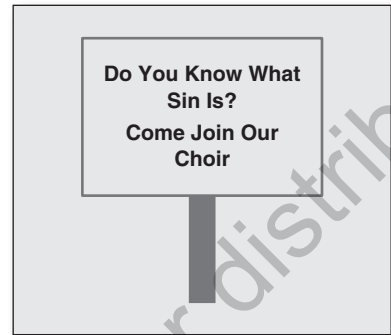


FIGURE 1.4 Church Marquee B



derives meaning in relationship to the term *sender*. Using the term *receiver* implies that there was a kind of action on the part of some “sender.” But the aforementioned examples demonstrate that communication occurs all the time, without any “sender’s” action. Why? Because expectations formed at one point in time influence interpretations at a later point, even without an explicit message.

Proposition 6: There Are Multiple Messages in Each Communication Event

For any primary message, there are countless other messages that can alter the context and change the interpretations. For example, Mr. Arrow might confirm the spelling of his name like this: “Mr. Arrow: ‘A’ as in alpha, ‘R’ as in rover, ‘R’ as in rover, ‘O’ as in orange, and ‘W’ as in wagon.” A functional equivalent that could be given by the stereotypical flirtatious man to a waitress could be this: “‘A’ as in adorable, ‘R’ as in rich, ‘R’ as in really rich, ‘O’ as in obliging, and ‘W’ as in willing.” To which the clever waitress might reply, “‘N’-‘O’: ‘N’ as in never and ‘O’ as in offensive.” The **secondary messages** are quite obvious. These statements provide the same information on the surface—a redundant expression of the spelling—but carry vastly different secondary messages.

Most professional speakers are quite skillful at exploiting the impact of secondary messages. Consider the case of a management consultant addressing an audience of potential clients. While trying to illustrate the usefulness of a particular appraisal system, she reveals, “When I was working for IBM, Microsoft, and Google, we used a similar system and recorded an immediate 20% improvement in production.” Ostensibly, her statement provides evidence for her claim that the appraisal system works. Yet there are secondary messages implicit in that statement as well:

- I have successfully implemented this system.
- IBM, Microsoft, and Google have greatly benefited from this system.
- If you select this system, you will be in the company of other great businesses.

Management consultants who use experiential examples to prove their points are more likely to be successful than those who rely exclusively on theoretical or statistical proof. The potent secondary messages provide a context—an aura of credibility—that makes the consultant more believable to listeners.

In many cases, people react as much to the secondary messages as they do to the primary message. Ultimately, these secondary messages, intended or unintended by the speaker, act as elements in forming the context of interpretation. Often, secondary messages are not processed consciously. No wonder we are sometimes baffled about the source of misperception. Consider the image in Figure 1.5. Which connotation do you pay attention to? People attending to the *image* walk away with quite different impressions from those noticing the *word*—the owl suggesting wisdom and the slug connoting dullness. Human communication bristles with such double messages, but astute observers recognize the conflicting nature of the signals.

FIGURE 1.5 Mixed Message: Which Connotation Do You Pay Attention To?

Proposition 7: Content and Context Interact to Produce Meaning

Content consists of the actual words, gestures, or behaviors of senders. The naive communicator thinks of this as the “essence” of communication. Someone who says, “My e-mail could not have been clearer” often focuses exclusively on the content (not the context). But the words in the e-mail are only part of the picture. The context basically functions as the background for the content, much like the canvas does for a painting.

Content alone cannot produce any meaning, except in a very rudimentary sense. “*Ceci est un message de la part de cette société*” is certainly a message. It has content, but does it have meaning? That depends, of course, on whether you can read French. Only then can you provide enough context to make an interpretation. Yet when translated into English, does meaning magically appear? Only in a narrow sense. The sentence translates as follows: “This is a message from the organization.” This reveals a little more about the message, but the “meaning” remains elusive.

However, this sentence, in a certain context, can have a very precise meaning. For example, one manager was given a lateral move in an organization. The manager was faced with the task of determining if this was a message from top management. In some companies, a “lateral move” means the kiss of death, an indicator of poor performance. In other companies, like Japanese organizations, a lateral move indicates nothing at all about performance.

Cognitive scientist and Pulitzer prize-winning author Douglas Hofstadter provides a deeply penetrating explanation of this issue.¹⁶ He postulates that there are three layers in any message. Layer 1, the **frame** message, says, “I am a message; decode me if you can!” In the previous example, the manager had to decide if the “lateral move” was an actual message. In some cases, a manager may be unaware that there is a message in the move. On the other hand, if the manager determines that there is, indeed, a message in the move, then a Layer 2 issue arises.

Layer 2, the outer message, tells us how to decode the message. What decoding mechanism should the manager use? The corporate culture and the unwritten organizational rules determine how the message should be decoded. Yet a manager may be able to recognize the message in the lateral move but not know how to interpret it. The situation would be similar to someone recognizing that French is being spoken but being unable to interpret the actual utterance.

The inner message, Layer 3, is the meaning as intended by the sender. In this case, top management may be saying, “Your performance has been lackluster. You better shape up!” In essence, the top two layers provide part of the context so that the actual meaning can be extracted.

Therefore, the context provides two important pieces of information to properly interpret the message. First, it designates what counts as a message and what does not. Is being left off a circulation list an oversight or a message? What about not being invited to certain social events? People are continuously faced with some kind of ambiguity. Second, the context tells us what decoding mechanism should be used. If, for example, an organization has gone through some radical changes to become “leaner and meaner,” how should being left off a circulation list be decoded? Should the old interpretation rules be used or the new ones? Clearly, the decoding mechanism significantly alters the interpretation. A message must have a context for interpretation to take place. Part of that context emerges from the message itself, but the most significant part arises from the unwritten organizational rules.

This complex process of meaning construction raises some disconcerting questions. Can managers ever be completely sure that their words or actions will be interpreted as intended? In a word, no. Yet does this process make it impossible to predict how employees will probably interpret a message? No. A manager cannot look for total certainty of interpretation but rather must learn to live with the probable and plausible. How can managers achieve reasonable certainty that their actions and words will be interpreted as intended? They do so by fully understanding how people interpret messages. Although the interpretations people make are relative, the process is not. We all use a similar process to construct meaning. Inferring how the context and content will interact in the receiver’s mind lies at the heart of effective communication.

Implications of the Propositions

The implications of these propositions are woven into the fabric of the following chapters. However, several deserve to be highlighted at this point.

Explore the Employees' Context

The more managers know about the context in which employees interpret actions and messages, the greater the likelihood that they can accurately predict the probable interpretations. For example, Management by Wandering Around helps managers learn about employee attitudes, environment, needs, and desires. This, then, helps managers develop an intuitive understanding of their employees' context of interpretation.¹⁷ This kind of knowledge can help the manager implicitly, if not explicitly, structure communication so it will be interpreted as intended. One executive summarized it best:

Perceptions form around tiny bits of data and become stronger as supporting evidence accumulates; they are never completely accurate, nor are they completely wrong. Staying in touch with others' perceptions is difficult, however, partly because these may not be wholly conscious and partly because only the tip of what may be a large threatening iceberg will be known to any one employee. So managers must piece together the overall picture for themselves by listening for the tone, context, or shading that doesn't quite match their own perceptions. Moreover, managers (particularly those at high levels) must consider carefully how their decisions will be perceived. If a decision is right in some business sense but wrong (for whatever reason) from the employees' perspective, its implementation will be erratic at best.¹⁸

Carefully Manage Employee Expectations

Because employee interpretations are highly dependent on message sequences, the well-worn counsel to "underpromise, overdeliver" makes perfect sense. Expectations act as silent benchmarks that measure performance and gauge trustworthiness. Consider the executive who must announce a wage freeze. If the messages preceding the announcement created an expectation of a wage increase, then employees will be greatly disappointed and perhaps question the executive's integrity (overpromised, underdelivered). If the messages preceding the announcement focused on potential job losses or wage decreases, the news would be greeted more favorably (underpromised, overdelivered). Note that employees have vastly different interpretations of the *same* announcement depending on their expectations, not the manager's expectations. Expectation management attempts to tap into the mental calculus employees use to make sense of organizational events. If executives and managers do not shape employee expectations, others will, and often in ways that run counter to organizational objectives.

Carefully Frame Messages

Two scholars describe framing in the following way:

The essential tool of the manager of meaning is the ability to frame. To determine the meaning of a subject is to make sense of it, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations.¹⁹

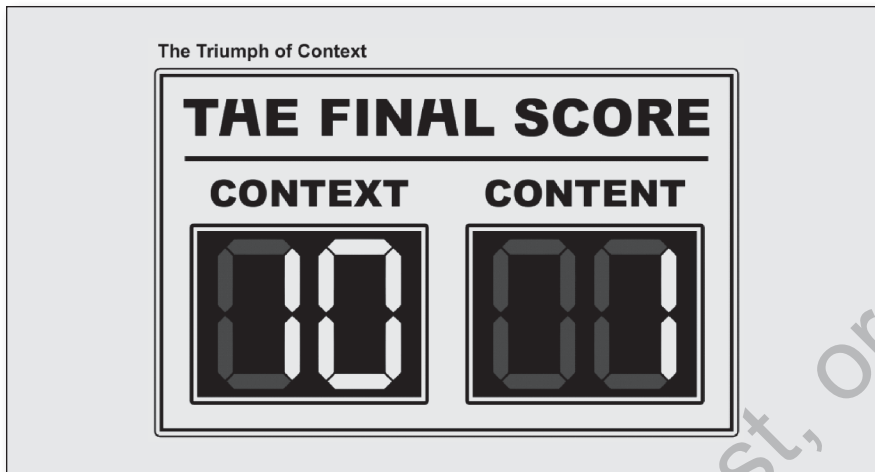
The frame acts as a lens through which the other issues are viewed, highlighting certain images and refracting others. The frame alters the probable interpretations. Consider Tom Cashman, who adeptly managed a large and complex unionized plant that manufactured paper products. He also skillfully framed a critical message. After months of grueling decision-making, the corporate headquarters decided to make a \$25 million capital improvement at his plant. Unfortunately, this also meant shutting down a sister plant in Pennsylvania—good news for his plant, bad news for the other plant. Announcing this news required a deft touch. He had to simultaneously signal his excitement at winning a difficult corporate battle, his resolve to meet the new challenge, and his sadness for workers (also unionized) at the sister plant. What did he do? He began his address to the hundreds gathered by asking, “How many of you guys remember when you proposed to your wife?” Hands shot up all over the room. He continued, “Do you remember your emotions at the time? Perhaps you recalled all the crazy things you did during your courtship. Maybe you remember wondering whether she would accept the offer. And you might even feel a tinge of guilt because you wooed her away from your best friend.”

That was the frame. Now the message: “That is how I feel today.” He went on to explain why, over the past few years, he had asked the plant to do some “crazy things” like taking on new projects—“They might not have made sense then, but we were positioning the plant for the future.” He expressed concern over the sister plant by comparing the news to the position of a guy who marries his best friend’s girlfriend. The entire presentation was designed to set the tone for the coming challenges and to help employees make sense out of a stressful situation filled with conflicting emotions. One wonders how the news would have been received without this frame. Would the employees have been as motivated to meet the new challenges? Would they have understood the significance of the decision? Would they have felt honored? I don’t think so.

Sculpt the Proper Context

Build enough frames, and a context emerges. Consider, for instance, how National Football League (NFL) coaches, commentators, and fans have learned to interpret

FIGURE 1.6 The Triumph of Context



player injury reports. NFL rules designate that a player classified as “doubtful” has at least a 75% chance of not playing. In reality, there is virtually no chance—less than 1%.²⁰ After all, Peyton Manning was routinely listed as “doubtful” during the 2011 season, when he never played a down. Almost everyone knows the game behind injury reports. So what? The frames of past injury reports craft a context for interpreting the data in the report (content), just like the familiar pairing of letters in Figure 1.6 induces most observers to skip over the fact that the “h” and “a” characters are identical. That’s how powerful contexts skew perceptions, interpretations, and ultimately reactions.

Therefore, skilled managers and companies carefully craft contexts by artfully accentuating certain interpretations while chiseling away others. Consider Johnson & Johnson (J&J), a company that routinely tops the “World’s Most Admired Companies” list. No single incident accounts for its stellar image. J&J is passionate about putting customers first. The first several lines of its credo say it all: “We believe our first responsibility is to the doctors, nurses, and patients, to mothers and fathers and all others who use our products and services. In meeting their needs, everything we do must be of high quality.”²¹ You can see the credo everywhere: webpages, sides of buildings, posters, and so on. The company uses it as the basis for training programs and performance appraisals.²² The result: Customers learn to expect this level of commitment, and employees feel obliged to meet those expectations. In other words, J&J carefully crafts the context so that employees pay attention to the right thing: customer needs. The context shapes interpretations such that employees become accustomed to viewing events from the customers’ perspective. J&J’s skillful management of the 1982 Tylenol tampering scare restored the brand’s integrity faster than most pundits dared imagine.

Anticipate Possible Interpretations (and Misinterpretations) of Messages, Events, and Symbols

Typically, managers only think about how best to structure their messages to get their points across. They rarely think, “How might my message be misunderstood?” Because communication is probabilistic in nature, effective managers try to lessen the possibility of likely misinterpretations. Osmo Wiio, a former Finnish parliament member turned organizational communication scholar, put it this way, à la Murphy’s laws:

- If communication can fail, it will!
- If you are satisfied that your communication is bound to succeed, it is bound to fail.
- If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.²³

With tongue only partly in cheek, he makes the fundamental point that managers cannot be 100% certain that their messages will be understood as intended.

Psychologist William James put it another way: “As there is no worse lie than a truth misunderstood by those who hear it, so reasonable arguments, challenges to magnanimity, and appeals to sympathy or justice, are folly when we are dealing with human crocodiles and boa-constrictors.”²⁴ His thought-provoking comments suggest that as we sort through the possible misinterpretations, we need to bear in mind the costs and benefits of speaking the truth. Many managers learn over the years that some people simply are not capable of learning from candid feedback about their performance. Perhaps the likelihood of willful misunderstanding or naive misinterpretation suggests that we avoid sharing certain messages in certain situations. As actor Jack Nicholson, performing as Colonel Jessep, growled during cross-examination in the movie *A Few Good Men*, “You can’t handle the truth!” Sadly, exercising discretion often means that skillful communicators choose silence over sharing insight.

Be Aware of the “Law of Large Numbers”

Statistician Persi Diaconis noted, “If you look at a big enough population long enough, then ‘almost any damn thing will happen.’”²⁵ Likewise, any message sent to enough people could be interpreted in almost any conceivable way. In fact, we should expect wacky interpretations from at least a few people. Several years ago, Pepsi ran a commercial campaign in which consumers collected points that could be used to purchase “Pepsi Stuff.” As a humorous clincher, the ad suggested that anyone collecting 7 million points could redeem them for one Harrier jet. How could anyone think this was a serious offer? Well, someone did. A man from Seattle even convinced several investors to help him collect the required number of points. Of course, when he went to redeem his prize, Pepsi shot down his dreams quicker

than a Sidewinder missile. The whole mess ended up in court. Fortunately, sanity prevailed, and Judge Kimba M. Wood ruled, “No objective person could reasonably have concluded that the commercial actually offered consumers a Harrier jet.”²⁶ Pepsi had fallen victim to the “**law of large numbers**” by communicating to millions of reasonable people but also to some unreasonable ones.

Use the “Blackout” Tactic to Clarify Potentially Ambiguous Messages

Occasionally, a speaker will make a statement and follow it up with a series of “I am not saying X; I am not saying Y.” This may seem a bit odd, for certainly most speakers know what they are saying. Yet on closer examination, this tactic can be exceedingly useful for the audience because it clarifies the precise meaning of the speaker. In essence, the speaker has blocked out certain probable interpretations of his remarks. When the original remark is made, it is as if the stage manager turns on numerous spotlights to illuminate the stage. As the speaker says, “I do not mean,” he extinguishes each light one by one until only one remains illuminated. So the speaker clarifies his precise meaning while signaling his sensitivity to other potential interpretations. This strategy could be modified to black out only a few possibilities and still leave a number of possible meanings highlighted, like illuminating only a sector of the stage.

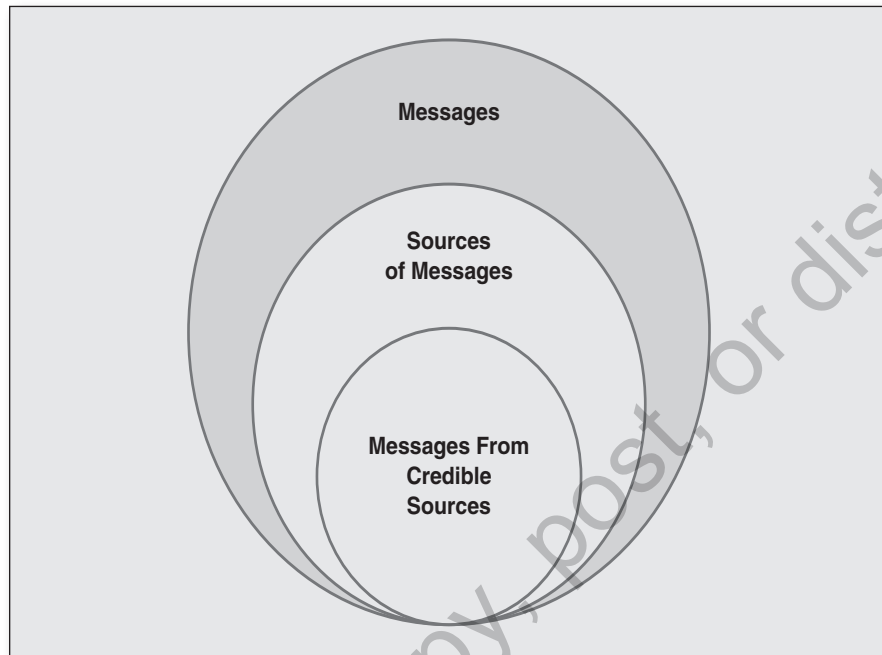
Pay Attention to Secondary Messages

Sometimes employees unwittingly undermine their credibility by sending inappropriate secondary messages. Consider this scenario. One manager spent close to 1 hour interviewing a potential employee. The interviewer was suitably impressed by the candidate’s experience, skills, and education. That changed in an instant. At the end of the interview, the manager asked the interviewee if she had any questions. Her response: “Can you tell me about the vacation schedule?” Fair or not, the manager concluded that the candidate did not have the right work ethic. Was this a legitimate question? Sure, but not for the first question. It signaled an inability to focus on important issues.

Recognize the Utility of Credible Sources

Why does a Stephen King novel far outsell one by Richard Bachman? In a world that judges literature on a by-the-merits basis, both authors should draw an equal number of readers. After all, King wrote both series of novels; he merely used Bachman as a pseudonym for one series of his work.

But this phenomenon makes perfect sense given the way humans make decisions.²⁷ In fact, this can be explained by referring to the work of Peter Atkins, Professor of Chemistry at the University of Oxford. He defines work as “motion against an opposing force.”²⁸ It takes mental work or effort to sort through all the probabilities. The opposing forces are all the messages vying for our attention.

FIGURE 1.7 Credibility as an Efficiency Tool

Consequently, we rely on time-saving shortcuts or rules of thumb. Credibility may be one of the most helpful and efficient of all our mental shortcuts. As seen in Figure 1.7, there are always fewer messages from *credible* people than there are from other sources. So what? We all save energy by primarily paying attention to messages from sources we deem credible. Traditionally, that means messages from sources that we find (a) competent, (b) dynamic, and (c) have our best interests in mind. Skilled communicators recognize that having the right message is not enough. It must also be delivered by the right source. In other words, the right message plus the wrong source often equals disregarded communication. And that is exactly what novelist Stephen King found out from his alter ego, Richard Bachman.

CONCLUSION

To paraphrase an old saying about statisticians, “Being a strategic communicator means never having to say you are certain.” Why? Because strategic communicators view communication in terms of probabilities. The propositions highlighted in this chapter point to a far more fluid and dynamic view of communication than may seem comfortable. Many people find it disconcerting to discover that meanings cannot be discovered by looking up definitions in the dictionary.²⁹ Rather, meanings and interpretations are determined by people, who are influenced by a broader

context that includes organizational rules, corporate culture, and personal relationships. Bewildering? Perhaps. Yet effective communicators are more comfortable with a *realistic* view of communication than a *convenient* one.

KEY CONCEPTS

Ambiguity	5	Frame	18
Communication	4	Law of large numbers	23
Context	4	Secondary messages	16

"DRILL DOWN" EXERCISES

1. Diagram the various probable meanings of a commonly used word (recall Figure 1.1).
2. Describe an instance where the context significantly shifted the meaning of a phrase.
3. Explain an instance where a key managerial initiative was properly (or improperly) framed.