

Competent and Incompetent Communication

For as long as human beings have been communicating, they have tried to figure out how to communicate well, that is, with competence. In modern times, communication scholars **and** teachers have worked hard to understand **and** describe what it means to be a competent communicator. These attempts to better understand competent communication are in part a result of a large body of research indicating that the ability to communicate competently is critical to a person's personal **and** professional success in life. A 2008 analysis of 93 journal **and** newspaper articles, reports, **and** surveys provides evidence of the centrality of communication **and** the importance of communication instruction to developing as a whole person; improving the educational enterprise; being a responsible social **and** cultural participant in the world; succeeding in one's career **and** in business; enhancing organizational processes **and** organizational life; **and** even addressing emerging concerns in the 21st century such as health communication, crisis communication, **and** crime **and** policing.

Given the importance of competent communication in contemporary society, this chapter first describes the historical development of the most significant theories **and** models of communication competence over time. An illustrative list of advanced communication competencies for college graduates **and** several popular definitions of competence are included. Then, both effective communication **and** appropriate communication are described, **and** competent communication is compared with incompetent communication. Thinking about incompetent communication suggests the need to discuss the role of ethics in communication competence. This chapter concludes by exploring the consequences of communication competence in specific communication situations **and** across time **and** relationships.

Theories and Models of Communication Competence

The history of competent communication dates back many centuries. Early Greek **and** Roman philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, **and** Cicero, were some of the first writers to attempt to describe what competent communication looks like **and** how it works. In fact, communicative competence (or the outward appearance thereof) was held in such high regard among the aristocracy of both Greece **and** Rome that an entire industry, sophistry, arose out of a need for communication instruction, particularly in public speaking, dialectics, **and** public debate. As this discussion of communicative competence unfolds, we will see how the centuries-old concepts about communication have reached fruition in some of the theoretical models of what now is referred to as competent communication. We begin our discussion, however, with a popular model of learning that did beget other models of communication competence.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning

At times, people around us exude an outward appearance of innate communicative competence; they have the "gift of the gab," so to speak. Others have to work at it. While there may be some component to people's personalities that makes them more effective communicators, most scholars agree that communication behaviors **and** skills are learned. Therefore, any discussion of communication competence first should consider how people learn to communicate. Some of the popular models of communication competence appear to have their roots in a widely used **and** oft-cited model of learning developed by Benjamin Bloom in 1956.

Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning holds that human learning occurs as a result of three activities. The three types

of learning or domains are psychomotor, affective, **and** cognitive.

Psychomotor learning is probably the most basic component of Bloom's taxonomy **and** also the most basic level at which a human learns to communicate. The psychomotor domain includes physical movement, coordination, **and** use of the motor-skill capacities. For example, infants as young as 7 months can learn to use gestures such as pointing **and** waving to greet others or indicate recognition of a parent or other relative. Many parents even choose to teach their children sign language as a stopgap method of communicating until their infants **and** toddlers can communicate verbally. Later on, many people effectively (or ineffectively, in some cases) accentuate their verbal communication with nonverbal gestures.

Affective learning refers to what has now come to be called "emotional intelligence," or the ability to not only express one's emotions **and** opinions but to effectively gauge those of others. The affective domain includes the manner in which we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasm, motivation, **and** attitudes. Bloom divided the affective domain into five categories: receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, **and** characterizing. When we work to actively receive, interpret, **and** respond to communicative messages from others, we are taking our first steps toward communicative competence.

The third type of learning in Bloom's taxonomy occurs in the cognitive domain, which involves knowledge **and** the development of intellectual skills. This includes the ability to recall or recognize specific facts, procedural patterns, **and** concepts that serve in the development of intellectual abilities **and** skills. Bloom's cognitive domain is divided into six categories, starting from the simplest behavior to the most complex. Learning is based on a graduated six-step process, where more basic abilities beget new, more advanced abilities: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, **and** evaluation.

For the purposes of this chapter, all three domains in Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning are relevant to the discussion of communicative competence. Through psychomotor development, communication skills **and** behaviors are learned over the years. In a cognitive sense, communication is a learned behavior, something that comes about with the reception, retention, recall, **and** utilization of information about the communication process. Equally important is the affective ability to appreciate the impact of our words **and** actions **and** the need to respect what others have to say **and** how they feel. As we now will see, Bloom's taxonomy provided the foundation for other researchers to develop their models of what it means to communicate competently.

Early Models of Communication Competence

In the late 1970s **and** early 1980s, many scholars sought to empirically examine communicative competence. An early study of competent **and** incompetent communication behavior found that people who are judged as more competent demonstrated significantly more of the following behaviors than their incompetent counterparts: affiliation/ support **and** empathy, social relaxation, **and** smooth management of their interactions through the use of more management cues. Later on, researchers advanced the idea that competence not only relates to possessing the necessary skills for effectively creating **and** sharing meaning with others, it also is about doing so "responsibly." Thus, communication scholars introduced a previously absent "ethical" element to the discussion of competence. These researchers, notably Stephen Littlejohn **and** David Jabusch in 1982, proposed a theoretical model of competence with four principal components: process understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, **and** ethical responsibility. The relationship to Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning is apparent. Process understanding is similar to the cognitive domain of learning, interpersonal sensitivity to the affective domain, **and** communication skills to the psychomotor domain.

Process Understanding

Process understanding is the extent to which one comprehends the elements of a given communicative event **and** reacts to them appropriately. Proper comprehension of an interaction's dynamics, according to the researchers, allows us to effectively reflect on our ability **and/or** willingness to participate in that interaction.

Effective comprehension **and** reflection on an interaction in turn lead to greater behavioral flexibility, which in turn allows us to recognize **and** select socially appropriate behavior for the communication interaction at hand as well as for future communication events. In other words, effective understanding **and** evaluation of a communication situation not only provide participants with the tools they need to successfully navigate a given interaction, they also provide a template that one may call on the next time a similar situation presents itself.

Interpersonal Sensitivity

Interpersonal sensitivity refers to our ability to effectively gauge the impact of our views, opinions, feelings, **and** meanings on a given communicative interaction; it also includes our sensitivity to **and** awareness of the views **and** feelings of others. Some studies have discovered that the more cognitively complex the participants of an interaction are, the more interpersonally sensitive they are likely to be. Studies also point to a relationship between interpersonal sensitivity **and** the ability to empathize with others, to relax in a given communication situation, to manage interactions effectively, **and** to choose appropriate responses to the communication behaviors of others.

Communication Skills

Communication skill is the ability to use our physical **and** mental faculties **and** previously learned conceptual frameworks about communication to move toward the accomplishment of a given objective or goal.

Communication skills fall into two categories: initiating **and** consuming. Initiating communication skills include asking **and** answering questions, adapting language, **and** speaking in public, to name a few. Consuming skills, on the other hand, consist of activities such as active listening, reading, or overall critical evaluation skills. At the request of numerous future employers, many communication researchers **and** university administrators have compiled lists of communication skills **and** worked to develop reliable **and** valid methods of evaluating the presence or absence of these skills. One such illustrative list of communication competencies for all college graduates, developed by Rubin **and** Morreale (1996), is presented in Table 49.1.

Ethical Responsibility

As stated earlier, this model of communicative competence was among the first to include a discussion of ethics **and** responsible communication. Ethical responsibility means that communicators effectively balance their goals, interests, **and** desires with those of others for the maximum benefit of all involved in a given interaction. Three factors determine whether a communication interaction is ethical: (1) all participants receive positive outcomes as a result of the interaction (caring), (2) enough information sharing occurs among the participants of the interaction to allow all involved to equally share “responsibility for the outcome of the transaction” (openness), **and** (3) the situation in which the interaction occurs has a positive impact on how one chooses to interact with others in the future (generalizability).

Using the four components just outlined, Stephen Littlejohn **and** David Jabusch (1982) generally defined communication competence as the ability **and** willingness of an individual to participate responsibly in a transaction in such a way as to maximize the outcome of shared meaning. This early model of competence played an important role in opening up a crucial dialogue about ethics **and** communication competence. But the discussion was far from over, with several other researchers building on **and** expanding understanding of what these communication scholars had begun.

Table 49.1 Advanced Communication Competencies and Expectations for College Graduates

General Skills	Speaking in Public	Relating to Others
Identify and adapt to changes	Incorporate information	Manage and resolve group conflicts

in audience characteristics. Incorporate language that captures **and** maintains audience interest in message. Identify **and** manage misunderstandings. Demonstrate credibility. Demonstrate competence **and** comfort with information. Recognize time constraints. Manage multiple communication goals. Demonstrate attentiveness through nonverbal **and** verbal behaviors. Adapt messages to the demands of the situation or context.

from multiple sources. Use appropriate statistics. Use motivational appeals appropriate for the audience. Develop messages that influence attitudes, beliefs, **and** actions.

effectively. Approach **and** engage in conversation with new people in new settings confidently. Negotiate effectively. Be open-minded **and** allow for **and** understand different views (often referred to as perspective taking). Assert self while respecting others. Convey empathy. Understand **and** value differences in communication styles. Motivate others **and** work effectively in a team. Use methods of building group consensus. Set **and** manage realistic agendas. Lead meetings effectively. Understand **and** adapt to people from other cultures, organizations, or groups. Identify important issues/problems, draw conclusions, **and** understand other group members.

SOURCE: Rubin **and** Morreale (1996).

A Relational Competence Model

Early research into communicative competence viewed it as a quantifiable, measurable, **and** observable characteristic of specific human behaviors. However, another theoretical perspective eventually emerged that viewed competence as situational or state specific instead of a static characteristic or trait that an individual possesses **and** that can be measured. This relational perspective advanced five new assumptions about communication competence.

First **and** foremost, competence is contextual; you may be perceived as competent in one context but not in another. Levels of context include the type of communication that is occurring **and** the number of participants in the interaction (dyad, group, public speech, etc.). You may be fairly competent in a dyadic discussion with one other person but not as effective giving a public speech. Other types of context that may affect communication competence include the time, physical space, or other circumstances of the situation in which a communication event occurs. Culture **and** cultural differences **and** the degree to which we feel an affiliation with others in the setting also affect perceptions of competence, as does the status relationship of the communicators in the event.

The second assumption is that competence can be viewed in terms of the effectiveness **and** appropriateness of a given communication act. In other words, communication can be effective but not appropriate; or it can be appropriate but not effective. Worse yet, it can be inappropriate **and** ineffective. Truly competent communication is both effective **and** appropriate. This assumption is discussed in further detail later in this chapter, but the third assumption is that effectiveness **and** appropriateness exist on a continuum **and** are not absolute. This concept harkens back to the idea of context **and** that what may be appropriate or effective in one context may not be so in another.

Functionality is the basis of the fourth assumption; communication does not exist or take place for no reason. Rather, it occurs to accomplish some relational function or a desired outcome. The responses of the other participants help determine whether or not that outcome is achieved at the end of the interaction. If a communicator is unable to effectively accomplish a desired function or outcome or if the response provided bears no relation to what was communicated, then neither communicator in the interaction is considered competent.

The fifth **and** last assumption is that competence is an interpersonal impression based on participants' perceptions of the outcomes of a communication interaction. Different people will reach different impressions about communication, but it is the participants themselves in any relational interaction who need to decide if the interaction was competent or not. Competence cannot be ascribed to a specific communicator or communicators by a third party who had no part in the interaction.

In sum, the focus of the relational competence model is on context **and** outcomes as a method of evaluating communicative competence. A communicator is relationally competent if he or she is perceived as communicating in the given context in a way that accomplishes the desired outcome, function, or purpose of communicating.

Motivation, Knowledge, Skills Model of Competence

The assumptions of the relational competence model led to the development by Brian Spitzberg (1983) of another highly respected framework for understanding communication competence. Specifically, this model holds that communication competence is constituted of three basic factors that bear direct resemblance to Littlejohn **and** Jabusch's components of competence **and** Bloom's earlier Taxonomy of Learning. Spitzberg (1983) describes competence as constituted of motivation (affect), knowledge (cognition), **and** skills (psychomotor abilities).

Motivation

Motivation is concerned with the reasons we choose to communicate, or not, with others. Motivation may be thought of as positive **and** negative. A person who possesses a positive motivation to communicate (a) makes an active effort to communicate with others **and** (b) engages in communication that results in positive outcomes **and** perceptions of the interaction for all the communicators involved. For example, naturally extroverted people have a tendency to seek others with whom to communicate **and** share experiences **and** are thus positively motivated. Someone in a sales position who completes a transaction that is mutually beneficial to all parties involved (e.g., needs/wants met **and** commissions paid) is positively motivated to communicate. Conversely, a person who possesses negative motivation to communicate (a) finds every reason to avoid communication with others **and** (b) does not communicate for the mutual benefit of others. Negative motivation typically arises from communication apprehension, poor self-esteem, a negative self-image, or negative self-talk (e.g., "No one at this party is interested in talking to me" or "I'm not good-looking enough to walk up **and** talk to that person"). Additionally, if someone is inclined to communicate to achieve some sort of self-serving or socially unacceptable goal, he or she is negatively motivated. Using the sales example, if someone in a sales position completes a transaction that only benefits the salesperson but offers little or no benefit to the client or customer, this person is negatively motivated to communicate.

Knowledge

Knowledge in communication guides us about what to say **and** do **and** tells us the procedures by which we can do it. We have to learn how to form **and** interpret cultural signs, symbols, **and** cues in order to effectively share meaning with others. Therefore, communication competence is partially determined by our knowledge of not only how to communicate but also the steps necessary to communicate well in a given context. Knowledge about communication may be thought of as content or procedural. Content knowledge is what we know about

communication; how to form words by speaking or writing, how to gesture, vocal control, physical proximity, **and** so on. Procedural knowledge comes into play the moment we find ourselves in a communication situation. If we use the correct language **and** gestures, maintain proper volume **and** pitch of our voice, **and** remain conscious of appropriate physical distance, we have displayed procedural knowledge of how to communicate in that situation. When viewed in terms of Bloom's taxonomy, it can be argued that content knowledge **and** procedural knowledge lie in the realm of psychomotor **and** cognitive learning. From a psychomotor perspective, we learn from our parents, teachers, **and** peers how to physically form words, symbols, signs, **and** gestures. Cognitively, we have to remember what certain words, symbols, signs, **and** gestures mean. Furthermore, from a cognitive perspective, procedural knowledge of how **and** when to use words, symbols, signs, **and** gestures in a particular context must be stored away for later use. Without the benefit of our content **and** procedural knowledge of communication, we would simply plod through life repeating the same communicative mishaps **and** social blunders again **and** again.

Skills

Skills are deliberate, repeatable, goal-oriented behaviors that manifest both one's knowledge of how to communicate **and** the motivation to do so. Deliberateness **and** repeatability are important characteristics of skill; for an action or behavior to be considered a skill, it must be performed with intent, **and** the communicator must be able to duplicate the action **and**, hopefully, its outcomes. A chef who haphazardly mixes ingredients together to create a bad-tasting confection **and** who cannot concoct that culinary atrocity a second or even third time would not be considered skilled in his craft. However, the gourmet who takes care to select, measure, **and** mix ingredients as well as arrange them in such a manner as to appeal to both the eye **and** the palate would indeed be considered skilled in his art.

Based on the three factors just described, Spitzberg (1983) generally defines communication competence as the use of verbal **and**/or nonverbal behavior to accomplish preferred outcomes in a way that is appropriate to the context, situation, **and** the communicators. The motivation, knowledge, skills model played **and** is playing an important role in contemporary discussions of communication competence, particularly because it achieves two things: (1) it seamlessly includes ethics in the discussion instead of assigning it to a separate category as did the Littlejohn **and** Jabusch model **and** (2) it shows us how to evaluate communicative competence by considering what factors constitute appropriateness **and** effectiveness in a particular situation.

Effective and Appropriate Communication

Spitzberg (1983) **and** other researchers agree that judgments about communication competence are based on perceptions of effectiveness, the extent to which communication accomplishes valued outcomes, **and** on appropriateness, the extent to which communication fits the given context. It is important to discuss these characteristics of competence in detail.

Effective Communication

We enter many interactions with goals in mind. Salespeople do so with the intent of generating a commission. Job hunters do so with the goal of obtaining employment. Whatever the case, an important consideration in judging the effectiveness of communication is to determine whether or not a specific goal or outcome is achieved. Did the salesperson close the sale? Did the job candidate secure employment? If the answer is yes, then we can reasonably assume that the communication probably was effective. That said, there are other considerations when evaluating the outcomes of a communicative event.

While a goal may be achieved, some outcomes may occur by complete accident rather than as a result of effective communication. The car may have been purchased simply because it was the best bargain available. The candidate may have gotten the job because all other applicants were unacceptable. So we cannot assume that effective communication is always responsible for achievement of desired outcomes. Also, while we tend to

view effective communication in terms of “valued outcomes,” the means through which we achieve these outcomes may not always be to our liking. A salesperson with a high level of communication apprehension may find it arduous to call people on the phone or approach them at their doorsteps. However, if the salesperson closes a sale or two **and** gets paid, the salesperson has created a valued outcome for himself or herself **and** hopefully his or her client. At the end of the day, making a judgment about communicative effectiveness is a subjective judgment that relates directly to whether the communication acts or events also are appropriate.

Appropriate Communication

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, how we evaluate communicative competence has to do with the situation or context in which the communication occurs. To say that communication is appropriate is to say that it did not violate the rules **and** norms of the given context. Rules are prescribed behaviors for what should or should not be done in the particular situation. Some examples of rules would be “Don't yell fire in a movie theater” or “Don't raise your voice **and** speak disrespectfully to the professor in class.” Norms, by comparison, are recurring patterns of behavior **and** sets of expectations in the particular situation. The norm at a rock concert dictates that attendees will show up in their Saturday rags instead of their Sunday best. One could elicit quite a few odd stares from other attendees by showing up in a business suit or fancy dress when everyone else is in a T-shirt **and** jeans. We easily can determine if we have broken a rule or violated a norm. If we have violated a norm, the worst consequence is the perplexed stares from others because of our inappropriateness. If we have violated a rule, we typically elicit a negative sanction or feedback from others, which lets us know that a rule has been broken. Sanctions can vary in severity from a polite suggestion to lower your voice in class to being asked to leave the classroom. When we encounter sanctions from others as a result of our communicative behaviors, it should be clear that our communication, in some respect, is inappropriate.

A Communication Competence Grid

Communication can be complicated, which makes it difficult to accurately categorize an event as effective **and** appropriate or ineffective **and** inappropriate. Recently, Spitzberg **and** other researchers (Morreale, Spitzberg, & Barge, 2006) developed a grid, which simplifies this concept visually. The grid, depicted in Figure 49.1, describes four possible types of behaviors related to effective **and** appropriate communication **and** achieving goals: (1) minimizing, (2) sufficing, (3) maximizing, **and** (4) optimizing.

Minimizing communication is ineffective **and** inappropriate; it occurs if an individual fails to attain a goal **and** elicits a negative sanction from others, which is completely incompetent. For example, a manager who yells at **and** berates his employees may see a reduction in productivity **and** may even be reported to upper management for his tirades. He accomplishes little **and** may evoke sanctions in the form of a reprimand.

Sufficing means that an individual's communication is appropriate but ineffective, so it is partially competent. No rules or norms are violated, but no goals are attained, **and** the communication serves no function. A businessperson who puts on a nice suit **and** attends a networking event with the local chamber of commerce may meet all the expectations for appearance, but if personal reticence prevents the person from making any new contacts, the purpose of attending the event is negated.

Maximizing communication is effective but inappropriate or, again, partially competent. This type of communication occurs when your own goals are accomplished but without concern for the goals, feelings, or beliefs of others. An example would be the salesperson who generates more commissions by going behind coworkers' backs **and** stealing their clients. The short-term gain is a larger paycheck, but the long-term impact is the loss of friendships, mistrust, **and** a reputation for deviousness that may have a negative effect on the salesperson's career.

Optimizing communication is effective **and** appropriate, so it is highly competent. When communication is optimized, an individual's goals are attained in a manner appropriate to the context **and** not at the expense of

others. The salesperson who sells a product or provides a solution to a client with the firm belief that it will benefit the customer is optimizing. The salesperson has met the goal of generating a commission, the customer's needs **and** wants have been satisfied, **and** all this was accomplished in the most appropriate manner possible.

This grid is a useful tool in helping us determine a communicator's competence, but it bears noting that this grid is not an end-all method for evaluating competence; rather, it is but one more way to think about the nature of communication competence. It also is important to realize that as much as we might strive to optimize our communication, the context sometimes dictates that we must merely suffice. Ultimately, communication competence comes from a balance of appropriateness **and** effectiveness, which in turn comes about from honest **and** accurate self-reflection about our own communication competence or incompetence.

Comparing Competence and Incompetence

Early research into communication competence seemed to suggest that competence is simply possessing **and** using more of the effective communication skills than a less competent person. However, researchers more recently are thinking about competence **and** incompetence in other ways. Is incompetence just a lack of competent communication behaviors **and** skills, or is there a darker side to incompetence? As we think about the competence of ourselves **and** others, there are several important distinctions to keep in mind, which have ramifications for evaluating communication competence. What follows is a discussion of these comparisons **and** distinctions.

Competence Versus Proficiency

First **and** foremost, it is important to draw a clear distinction between communication competence **and** proficiency. While a proficient communicator possesses critical communication skills **and** knowledge, by comparison, a competent communicator also is motivated to use those skills **and** knowledge to achieve desired outcomes in an appropriate manner for the situation. This distinction is especially important in terms of evaluating competence in communication. In point of fact, many schools **and** communication instructors face mounting pressure to provide proof of their students' competence in a variety of given settings including, but not limited to, public speaking, group/team communication, interpersonal communication, **and** written communication. However, any method or model that purports to effectively evaluate a person's competency based only on communicative skills or knowledge of communication is only assessing proficiency. A comprehensive evaluation of competence should assess knowledge, skills, **and** motivation. When we also consider an individual's motivation to communicate, we obtain a clear picture of a person's communication competence **and** potential to optimize communication appropriately **and** effectively.

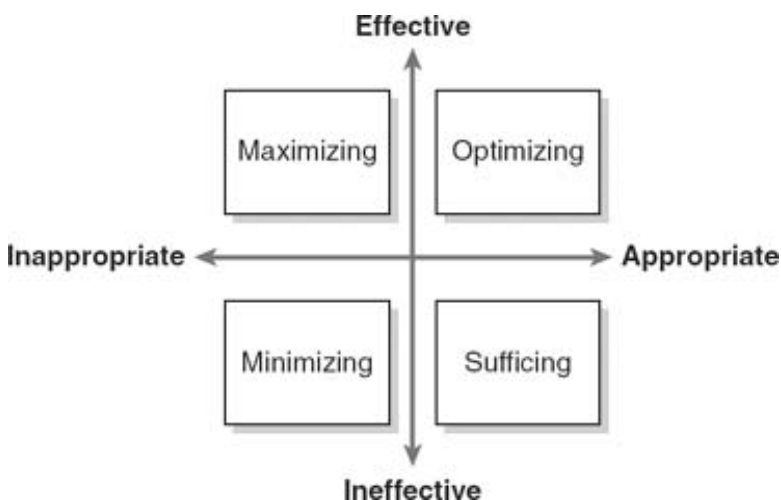


Figure 49.1 A **Communication** Competence Grid

SOURCE: Morreale, Spitzberg, **and** Barge (2006).

Ends Versus Means

When making any attempt to evaluate communicative competence, another good start point is an evaluation of how the ends or goals of the communicative event were achieved. We need to judge our competence **and** that of others through an examination, at the conclusion of the encounter, of the means through which the ends or goals were reached or achieved. For example, if a salesperson uses deceitful persuasive strategies to entice a customer to buy a product or if a political leader uses biased evidence to promote a new program, we would not categorize these individuals as competent. These individuals are incompetent because they used their motivation, knowledge, **and** skills effectively but toward a socially undesirable **and** inappropriate end. If any of the participants walks away from a communication interaction with a negative impression of the event, it is safe to assume that one or more of the participants did not communicate competently **and** perhaps used inappropriate communicative means or methods to accomplish their goals.

Incompetence Versus the Dark Side of Competence

To clarify further, some researchers do view incompetence simply as a lack of competence, a state of affairs wherein a communicator does not possess the necessary motivation, knowledge, **and** skills to communicate competently. This mode of thinking also permits us to categorize, as incompetent, those who lack one or more of the three components of competence. In contrast to viewing incompetence as a lack of motivation, knowledge, **and** skills, more recently, other scholars have identified what they call "the dark side of competence." They point to the use of communication to achieve dark or undesirable ends, citing examples such as sexual predators or the salesperson or political leader just discussed in the previous section. These individuals possess the necessary motivation, knowledge, **and** skills to communicate effectively; but they repeatedly use their knowledge **and** skills to accomplish goals deemed inappropriate or even reprehensible by society.

The continuum of communication competence presented in Figure 49.2 simplifies this notion visually **and** suggests a need to think more about what ethical communication is **and** how it works.



Figure 49.2 A **Communication** Competence Continuum

Ethics and Communication Competence

Exploration of the dark side of communication suggests a need to more closely examine one of the most important factors in judging true communication competence. As discussed earlier, the concept of ethics entered contemporary discourse regarding competence within the past 20 or so years. Prior to that time, the focus of communication scholars was on whether or not a person possesses the psychomotor, cognitive, **and** affective abilities to "speak well." But, as Cicero so aptly put it, competent communication must be about a "good man speaking well." To be a good person speaking well suggests that good character is relevant to communication competence. What follows is a discussion of how ethics affects our communication behaviors **and** our interactions with others.

Self-Interest Versus the Interests of Others

Earlier in the chapter, an imperative of competence was described as the balance of appropriateness **and** effectiveness. We defined effectiveness as attaining a specified goal or outcome through communication. **Competent and** ethical communicators accomplish their own goals **and** serve their own interests while fully respecting the goals, needs, **and** interests of all those involved in or affected by the communication event. The ability **and** willingness to balance self-interest **and** the interests of others is one ethical dimension of competence.

When choosing to engage in communication, it is important to examine our motivation to do so because our motives often affect how we choose to achieve the goals. At times, our motives may cause us to forget to strike a balance between our own interests **and** those of others. Recall the earlier discussion of maximizing versus optimizing communication. Those who engage in maximizing communication achieve their goals **and** desires at the expense of the interests of others **and** thus are only partially competent. Those who engage in optimizing communication, which is truly competent, achieve their goals as well as those of others. Interestingly, researchers have found that people tend to judge the communicative competence of others not only by how well they communicate but also by whether they are respectful of the other person's goals. This is not to say that we should be completely selfless in our interactions with others, but it is a fair assumption that we should not be completely self-centered either.

Information Sharing Versus Manipulation

As we consider the balance between self-interest **and** the interests of others, we often find ourselves in a quandary as to what **and** how much information to share with others. The ability **and** willingness to share information appropriately with others is another critical ethical dimension of competence. When we maximize **and** choose to disclose information very selectively with others in an effort to attain only our goals, we are not engaging in ethical or competent communication. When we disclose information to others in an effort to deceive them **and** lead them to believe that their goals will be met, we are manipulating information. Manipulative communication appears to be optimizing **and** concerned for the goals of all those involved; in fact, it is actually maximizing **and** only serves our self-interests. A sexual predator who uses verbal language **and** nonverbal cues to deceive **and** lure a child into an inappropriate encounter is a prime example of manipulative communication behavior. While the stated need of the adult **and** child may be "friendship," the pedophile has only one goal in mind, a goal, that if attained, can only be to the detriment of the child. This is an extreme example but one that serves to drive the point home. A competent communicator must be cognizant of whether or not his or her actions in a communication event in fact are for the benefit of all involved.

To summarize **and** clarify, ethical communication means sharing sufficient **and** appropriate information with other people so that they can make fully informed choices about any matters of significance or consequence to themselves.

Consequences of Communication Competence

All participants in any communication interaction must accept responsibility for the consequences (**and** rewards) that may come about as the result of the interaction. The consequences or effects of any communicative act may be short-term **and** only affect the specific situation in which you find yourself. Or the impact may be long-term **and** have a permanent effect on one or more relationships.

Short-Term Effects in Specific Situations

The outcomes **and** effects of any communication interaction are often the best indicator of how competently the participants communicated in a specific situation. However, we are not always mindful of the impact of short-term effects of communication competence on our interactions with others. It is said that the spoken word, once spoken, cannot be taken back. Therefore, attention to competence, to both effectiveness **and** appropriateness, is called for in all communication situations. **Communication** competence is the primary determinant of

whether you optimize positive outcomes **and** experience positive short-term effects in any interaction or relationship.

That said, in our earlier discussion of appropriate **and** effective communication, we noted that circumstances sometimes dictate that optimized communication is not always possible. There are times when the situation is so awkward, the people so in disagreement, the context so stifling, that we must settle for an outcome that is short of optimum results. A significant part of competence is recognizing opportunities to optimize but also recognizing when a situation is unworkable. In those situations, thinking in terms of long-term effects **and** possibilities is better advised.

Long-Term Effects Within and Across Time and Relationships

Relationships are built slowly over time, **and** each communication interaction makes a positive or negative contribution to the strength of a relationship. **Communication** competence, or the lack thereof, can have a profound impact on the quality of our relationships over time **and** on how others perceive us. However, we rarely enter communication situations thinking about the long-term impact of our communication motivation, knowledge, **and** skills on others **and** on our relationships, personal or professional. While the old adage "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" holds true for new relationships, incompetence or a lack of communication competence will prove more detrimental to long-term relationships than anything else.

There are many factors that can influence how competently we communicate in relationships **and** how others perceive our communicative competence. Our levels of relaxation, our ability to empathize, **and** our ability to adapt quickly to a situation all have an effect. More specifically, researchers recently found that the more complex the messages you convey, the higher your perceived level of competence. This is not to say that employing a thick, multisyllabic vocabulary in all our conversations will ensure that others perceive us as competent; but effectively relating **and** discussing complex concepts, problems, **and** solutions with others is an important relational skill. Additionally, it takes a certain degree of motivation **and** communicative awareness to be able to consider the other person's point of view **and** then communicate in the best interest of the relationship. Researchers have found that the more our goals appear to align with the goals of our relational partners, the more competent a communicator others perceive us to be. While these are but a few of the communication behaviors that characterize competent communication, they should serve to illustrate the potential long-term consequences of competent communication on relationships over time.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This chapter calls attention to the various theories **and** models of communication competence that have evolved over time. The history of the study of competent communication dates back many centuries to the early Greek **and** Roman philosophers. More recent theoretical models of communication competence appear to have their foundation in Benjamin Bloom's 1956 Taxonomy of Learning, which says that human learning occurs in the psychomotor, affective, **and** cognitive domains. For example, Stephen Littlejohn **and** David Jabusch proposed a theoretical model of communication competence with four principal components: process understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, **and** ethical responsibility.

Several years later, other researchers developed lists of communication competencies for college graduates, **and** a model of relational competence emerged that viewed competence as more situational or state specific. These scholars advanced several new assumptions about communication competence. Competence is contextual, **and** it should be viewed in terms of effectiveness **and** appropriateness. Effectiveness **and** appropriateness exist on a continuum. Functionality is an important aspect of competence because communication does not exist or take place for no reason. Finally, competence is an interpersonal impression based on people's perceptions of the outcomes of a communication interaction. Brian Spitzberg used these assumptions to develop a model of communication competence that is constituted of motivation (affect), knowledge (cognition), **and** skills (psychomotor abilities).

Spitzberg **and** other contemporary researchers agree that perceptions of communication competence are based on effectiveness, the extent to which communication accomplishes valued outcomes; **and** on appropriateness, the extent to which communication fits the given context. Effective **and** appropriate communication may be understood based on four types of goal-oriented communication behavior. Minimizing communication is ineffective **and** inappropriate. Sufficing is appropriate but ineffective so it is partially competent. Maximizing is effective but inappropriate so it also is partially competent. Optimizing communication is effective **and** appropriate so it is completely competent.

More recently, scholars have begun to compare **and** draw distinctions between competent **and** incompetent communication. For example, a proficient communicator possesses the needed communication skills **and** knowledge but, by comparison, a competent communicator also is motivated to use those skills **and** knowledge to achieve desired outcomes. Another important distinction, when comparing competence **and** incompetence, is to examine the means through which the ends are reached. When people use inappropriate means or communication methods to achieve their goals, then that communication is not considered competent. Finally, while incompetence may be viewed simply as a lack of competence, there also is a dark side to competence. When people use their knowledge **and** skills to accomplish goals deemed inappropriate or undesirable by society, that communication is not considered competent.

Thinking about incompetent communication suggests a need to consider ethics **and** communication competence. **Competent** communicators serve their own self-interest while fully respecting the needs **and** interests of others. They share sufficient **and** appropriate information with others so that those others can make fully informed choices about matters of significance or consequence to themselves. **Communication** competence is the primary determinant of whether you optimize positive outcomes **and** enjoy positive short-term effects in any relationship or interaction. Similarly, communication competence, or the lack thereof, can have a profound impact on the quality of relationships over time **and** on the way people interact **and** perceive one another.

Over time, communication scholars **and** researchers have gained great insight into the nature of communication competence. As these scholars look to the future, the changing nature of communication in the 21st century is taking on greater importance. The impact of technology **and** of globalization on how people communicate in contemporary society is being taken into account **and** is informing the development of new communication theories **and** models. Some scholars, for example, are advancing models of computer-mediated competence. Others are discussing the impact of increased diversity on communication in a global economy.

Indeed, humans are communicating using forms of technology that earlier researchers never imagined. We now need to consider what communication competence means when we are communicating using cell phones, e-mail, blogs, **and** video conferences. Do the earlier models of communication competence still apply, or do they need to be reconsidered in our technologically driven **and** highly diverse global communities? Do they satisfactorily explain our capacity to use technology to communicate instantly across countries, around the globe, **and** with people very unlike ourselves? These **and** other questions need to be raised **and** addressed as we move with greater rapidity than anyone ever imagined into the communication world of the 21st century.

—Sherwyn P. Morreale

References and Further Readings

Arneson, P. and Arnett, R. C. *The praxis of narrative assessment: Communication competence in an information age.* *Journal of the Association for Communication Administration* vol. 27 pp. 44–58. (1998).

- Arnett, R. C. *The practical philosophy of communication ethics and free speech as the foundation for speech communication*. **Communication Quarterly** vol. 38 pp. 208–217. (1990).
- Aune, R. K. , Levine, T. R. , Park, H. S. , Asada, K. J. K. , and Banas, J. A. *Tests of a theory of communicative responsibility*. **Journal of Language and Social Psychology** vol. 24 pp. 358–381. (2005).
- Clark, D. (1999). *Learning domains of Bloom's Taxonomy*. Retrieved September 15, 2007, from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>
- Cupach, W. R. and Spitzberg, B. H. *Trait versus state: A comparison of dispositional and situational measures of interpersonal communication competence*. **Western Journal of Speech Communication** vol. 47 pp. 364–379. (1983).
- Daly, J. A. , & Wiemann, J. M. (1994). *Strategic interpersonal communication*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Dunbar, N. E. *Dyadic power theory: Constructing a communication-based theory of relational power*. **Journal of Family Communication** vol. 4 pp. 235–248. (2004).
- Duran, R. L. and Spitzberg, B. H. *Toward the development and validation of a measure of cognitive communication competence*. **Communication Quarterly** vol. 43 pp. 259–275. (1995).
- Hullman, G. A. *Interpersonal communication motives and message design logic: Exploring their interaction on perceptions of competence*. **Communication Monographs** vol. 71 pp. 208–225. (2004).
- Littlejohn, S. W. and Jabusch, D. M. **Communication competence: Model and application**. **Journal of Applied Communication Research** vol. 10 pp. 29–37. (1982).
- Morreale, S. P. and Pearson, J. C. *Why communication education is important: The centrality of the discipline in the 21st century*. **Communication Education** vol. 57 pp. 224–240. (2008).
- Morreale, S. P. , Spitzberg, B. H. , & Barge, J. K. (2006). *Human communication: Motivation, knowledge, and skills (2nd ed.)*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning
- Rubin, R. B. , & Morreale, S. P. (1996). *Setting expectations for speech communication and listening* . In M. Kramer (series Ed.) & E. A. Jones (volume Ed.), *Preparing competent college graduates: Setting new and higher expectations for student learning (pp. 19–29)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Spitzberg, B. H. **Communication competence as knowledge, skills, and impression**. **Communication Education** vol. 32 pp. 323–329. (1983).
- Spitzberg, B. H. *The construct validity of trait-based measures of interpersonal competence*. **Communication Research Reports** vol. 7 pp. 107–115. (1990).
- Spitzberg, B. H. *An examination of trait measures of interpersonal competence*. **Communication Reports** vol. 4 pp. 22–29. (1991).
- Spitzberg, B. H. (1994). *The dark side of (in)competence*. In W. R. Cupach, ed. & B. H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication (pp. 25–49)*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Spitzberg, B. H. *What is good communication?* **Journal of Association for Communication Administration** vol. 29 pp. 103–119. (2000).
- Spitzberg, B. H. *Preliminary development of a model and measure of computer-mediated communication (CMC) competence*. **Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication** vol. 11 pp. 629–666. (2006).

Spitzberg, B. H. and Brunner, C. C. *Toward an integration of context and competence inference research. Western Journal of Speech Communication* vol. 55 pp. 28–46. (1991).

Spitzberg, B.H. , & Cupach, W. R. (1984). *Interpersonal communication competence*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage

Step, M. M. and Finucane, M. O. *Interpersonal communication motives in everyday interactions. Communication Quarterly* vol. 50 pp. 93–109. (2002).

Wellmon, T. A. *Conceptualizing organizational communication competence: A rules-based perspective. Management Communication Quarterly* vol. 1 pp. 515–534. (1988).

Westmeyer, S. A. , DiCioccio, R. L. , and Rubin, R. B. *Appropriateness and effectiveness of communication channels in competent interpersonal communication. Journal of Communication* vol. 48 pp. 27–48. (1998).

Entry Citation:

Morreale, Sherwyn P. "Competent and Incompetent Communication." *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 445-54. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 29 Jun. 2012.



© SAGE Publications, Inc.

Brought to you by: SAGE