Interpersonal Communication Skills at Work

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:
- Understand the role of interpersonal communication in the workplace
- Describe the types and functions of relationships
- Identify different approaches to conflict
- Determine how certain conflict styles work in different situations
- Analyze and apply negotiation strategies that meet different objectives
- Provide and evaluate constructive feedback
- Identify and apply Gibb’s framework for building positive climates

Chapter Outline

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Introduction

Cora Sims has worked at Kelpin Publishers as a project manager for five years. In this role she works with many different members of the organization to facilitate the publication of elementary school reading materials. From graphics to technology to accounting, she has developed relationships with many different departments. She reports directly to the senior publishing partner, Mac Feral. Although she feels that she has a strong relationship with Mac, she sometimes feels disappointed that he does not consult with her on big decisions. This is especially upsetting because she sees her coworker Sue having lunches and meetings with Mac where she gets to share her opinion and provide input. Many times, she’ll filter messages for Mac through Sue because she feels as though Mac is more likely to listen. Sue encourages Cora to make more of an effort to work with Mac and to not be afraid of telling Mac when he’s leaning toward making the wrong decision. Even though Cora feels that her relationship with Mac could be stronger, she feels more confident in the relationships she has developed with others in the organization. She considers Sue one of her best friends, and they even carpool daily, where they talk about work and their families. She plays on the company softball team, which in addition to being fun, provides a way for her to interact with people from different departments that she relies on for meeting publication deadlines. Although her relationships are strong, she has some fear about what the future might bring. Mac has informed her that a massive budget cut is in the works that will affect the entire company.
He’s holding the project managers directly responsible for decreasing costs by coordinating and monitoring the work from the different areas such as advertising, instructional technology, and graphics. She contemplates how she might handle the tough times ahead knowing that she’ll have to be assertive in meeting the new budget goals.

The following sections offer Cora more to contemplate in the way of her relationships with her boss and coworkers and provide specific strategies for negotiating with others as well as working to keep the climate at Kelpin Publishers positive and supportive in the midst of budget cuts. Read on to see how these topics might help Cora.

Defining Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is critical to the basic functioning of any organization. **Interpersonal communication** is defined as communication of a relational nature between two or more people. These relationships are marked by **interdependence**, where people rely on each other equally for both personal and professional support, and **uniqueness**, which signifies the special quality of the communication between individuals. Relationships form between many individuals in the workplace and are marked by communication that is task oriented (focused on completing projects and duties) and relationship (focused on supporting others or sharing personal information). We form relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and clients or customers. Our ability to Competently communicate with people at work affects our job satisfaction, feeling of belongingness in an organization,
and ability to successfully complete tasks and projects in functional and rewarding ways. Many of the chapters in this book deal with issues of interpersonal communication, including nonverbal communication, language use, multiculturalism, diversity, and working with others in small groups. This chapter focuses on the different types of relationships you are likely to encounter, how to develop effective relationships through understanding the communication patterns of others, and learning how to manage relationships through negotiation, constructive feedback, and strategies for enhancing relational climates.

Types of Workplace Relationships

You are likely to form many types of relationships at work. Contrary to traditional forms of organizational management, much more happens during a work shift than merely accomplishing tasks. Through completion of duties we come to know and interact with many different organizational members and form friendships. These relationships are often classified as same status or mixed status. These terms signify whether you work on the same organizational level or whether one person holds higher status or power, such as a supervisor. Let’s begin by examining mixed-status relationships.

Mixed-Status Relationships

Mixed-status relationships refer to relationships employees have with people above or below their own position in the organization. Mixed-status relationships often are referred to as supervisor–subordinate or leader–member relationships. The nature of these relationships can vary significantly, depending on individuals and organizational structures. One theory that describes outcomes of the quality of these types of relationships is leader–member exchange theory (LMX). The basic premise of this theory explains how leaders typically have groups of employees who emerge as part of their in-group, middle-group, and out-group. Being in the in-group signifies a higher level of liking and higher-quality communication, which results in more support, resources, and even responsibility. Out-group membership means that an employee is not in the supervisor’s inner circle and has lower-quality communication exchanges, resulting in less support, resources, and responsibilities. Quite a bit of research on this topic shows that members of the in-group often receive greater benefits than those of the out-group. Scholars recommend that managers work to include all their employees in the in-group and to promote equality among employees to reduce the perception that they show favoritism in distributing resources. The stronger, more positive the superior–subordinate relationship, the higher performance and innovation levels among employees. Additionally, these relationships likely motivate employees to go above and beyond their role responsibilities for the organization.
**Same-status relationship:**
Includes a wide variety of people in the organization, specifically at the same level of power and authority within or outside employee’s department or work group.

**Informational peer:**
Coworker with whom we primarily share information about work.

**Collegial peer:**
Coworker with whom we discuss work-related topics as well as family and personal issues.

**Special peer:**
Coworker who is considered the most intimate peer with whom we share personal information and from whom we receive emotional and social support.

**Same-Status Relationships**

Same-status relationships include a wide variety of people in the organization, specifically at the same level of power and authority within or outside employees’ department or work group. These types of relationships provide a wide range of support, ranging from what Kram and Isabella describe as informational, collegial, and special peers. Informational peers are coworkers with whom we primarily share information about work, whereas collegial peers are coworkers with whom we discuss work-related topics as well as family and personal issues. Finally, special peers are considered the most intimate peers with whom we share personal information and from whom we receive emotional and social support. Smooth working relationships with coworkers provide us many benefits, including an ability to complete our work efficiently and at higher quality levels. They also provide us with social support to cope with burnout and workplace stressors. Friendship enhances our interest and motivation at work and can help us to identify more with our organizations. After all, organizations are made up of people, so forming meaningful relationships can translate into meaningful work. A study by Bridge and Baxter found that workplace friends decrease tension and increase cohesion, especially when employees face role conflicts. Of course, not all same-status relationships are classified as friendships, but cultivating strong same-status ties is important for organizational satisfaction, productivity, and commitment.

Learning specific skills such as how to negotiate conflict and offer constructive feedback are important ways to build positive working relationships with employees of higher or equal status. The following sections focus on these skills and ways you can frame your messages to maximize success.
The previous sections stressed the positive outcomes of strong organizational relationships, but there is growing research on the effects of dysfunctional relationships in the workplace. These relationships include incivility, emotional abuse, and bullying behaviors. The following excerpt written by Dr. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik describes the prevalence and harmful nature of workplace bullying. For a full transcript of the story go to: http://www.communicationcurrents.com/index.asp?bid=15&issuepage=8

**Workplace Bullying**

Adult bullying at work is a shocking, terrifying, and at times shattering experience. What's more, bullying appears to be quite common, as one in ten U.S. workers report feeling bullied at work, and one in four report working in extremely hostile environments. Workplace bullying is repetitive, enduring abuse that escalates over time and results in serious harm to those targeted, to witnessing coworkers, and to the organizations that allow it to persist. Bullying runs the gamut of hostile communication and behavior and can consist of excluding and ignoring certain workers, throwing things and destroying work, public humiliation and embarrassment, screaming and swearing, and occasionally even physical assault. What makes workplace bullying so harmful is its persistent nature. Exposed workers report that bullying goes on and on, lasting for months and—in many cases—even years.\(^5\)

**Dealing with Conflict**

Conflict is an inevitable part of life, especially work life, so learning how to deal with difficult people and situations is critical to maintaining relationships and being successful. In organizations conflicts arise over many different issues, including personal differences, budgets, resources, office space, methods, procedures, and policies. At the root of most conflict is the idea that we have differing goals and often different styles and values from other people. Learning your own tendencies in dealing with conflict and knowing
the style of others is critical to managing situations. This next section reviews the basic conflict management styles with a focus on the pros and cons to each style.

**Conflict**: The verbalized tension occurring between two or more people with differing goals or wants.

**Conflict**, broadly defined, describes the verbalized tension that occurs between two or more people with differing goals or wants. Conflict is often characterized in terms of wins and losses, but you should examine these styles beyond the terms of a scoreboard because what might appear as a win or a loss in reality might not be successful or unsuccessful, depending on different situations. Five conflict styles are used based on different situations: avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising, and collaborating. These styles were developed by Killman and Thomas, who categorized a person's orientation to conflict based on their concern for people and their concern for task.

**Avoiding**
The avoiding strategy is often referred to as the withdrawing style because instead of dealing with conflict directly, a person will avoid it altogether. The outcome of avoiding or withdrawing is that neither person gets what they want. The person who engages in an avoidance strategy either gives up their desires or they meet their desires by failing to engage in the conflict to begin with. Avoidance can be a sufficient strategy if the issue is not important or if engaging in the conflict would be detrimental to the relationship or if we could hurt someone by pursuing the conflict. The downside of overrelying on this strategy is that the person using avoidance will not have their needs met and the conflict may never be resolved. This can wear on a relationship over time. Many times people engage in rather bizarre behavior when avoiding conflict, such as reducing eye contact, ignoring phone calls, or going out of their way when walking to avoid crossing paths with someone. As you can see, these tactics do not facilitate solutions and more than likely postpone them.

**Accommodating**
When we have a strong preference about something such as a policy or proposal, but instead decide to let the other person have their way, we are
**Accommodating.** In this situation, we don’t withdraw from the conflict altogether, but we work at smoothing things over to allow the other person to get what they want. Smoothing is also another term used to describe this conflict approach. Accommodating is a skillful tool when the other party is really passionate about a specific course of action and you do not feel as strongly. However, accommodating can be detrimental when you always use this specific strategy. In the workplace people may perceive you as lacking initiative, especially if you continually give up your power to persuade on courses of action by allowing someone else to always get their way. Always being accommodating can make you feel like a doormat.

**Compromising**

The word *competition* evokes a sense of winning and championship over another person, and that is exactly what this conflict strategy describes. When we **compete** with others in conflict, we seek to persuade others that our courses of action or desires are supported over another person’s or another group’s. When one person “wins” a conflict, then the other party loses. There are times in organizations where this is a highly valued skill, especially when negotiating for new business. Sometimes, organizations themselves set individuals and groups up to compete for resources, which is not always the best course of action for promoting strong interpersonal relationships. Losers may come out disappointed and hurt, which affects morale. If your primary style is to compete, you need to analyze each situation to see if the outcome is really worth potentially damaging relationships.

**Compromise**

**Compromise** is a useful tool because it allows both parties to gain a solution by each sacrificing a part of what they want. Although something must be given up, a reasonable solution can be arranged that makes both parties happy. Compromise is probably one of the more common ways of negotiating conflict. In the workplace, overreliance on this conflict strategy can promote more strategic bargaining from both parties. Situations can be manipulated in that if you know going in that you will have to give something up, you may fight to include something that’s not all that important so that you can show a good faith effort at compromising by giving up this item later. It can result in a much more strategic conflict resolution than necessary. On the other hand, there are positive outcomes of compromise because everyone gets a little bit of what they want.

**Collaboration**

Ideally, when parties **collaborate**, they both come out with all their goals met. Perhaps, their goals are not met in the way they initially intended, but as two opposing groups or people collaborate, they can actually come up with joint solutions that meet all the needs, goals, or demands of the situation. Although collaboration is thought to be one of the healthiest conflict management
Why is collaboration a useful tool in conflict?

approaches, it is not always possible or optimal in all situations, depending on money, relationships, and time pressure. Collaboration is more time consuming than other conflict approaches because it requires consensus and careful negotiation.

**Negotiation**

Regardless of the status of the other person, specific interpersonal skills are critical to smooth interpersonal relations. First, we must understand how to negotiate and deal with potential conflict. As a student of communication, you should take the time to assess the motivations and the communication styles of others, as this tells you a lot about which communication strategies will be most effective in dealing with others and in making sure both parties are able to have their goals and needs met. **Negotiation** is a means to reach mutual agreement through communication.\(^7\)

According to Teresa Smith, business professor at the University of South Carolina, Sumpter, and organizational consultant, most organizational members make six common mistakes when negotiating.\(^8\) They negotiate emotionally, take it personally, fail to ask for what they want, accept “no” too quickly, and lack knowledge and flexibility. To avoid these pitfalls, she recommends the following strategies:

1. Decide what you want.
2. Understand the other side’s bargaining style.
3. Analyze the situation.
4. Structure the situation to your advantage.
5. Display confidence.
Any time you go into a negotiation, you need to have a goal in mind and know what you are willing to accept as an outcome. Typically, this means you should prepare to ask for something more than you are willing to settle for and then offer compromise solutions that move you closer to your desired goal. You also have to go into the situation knowing who you’re dealing with. Knowing a person’s basic approach to conflict and negotiation helps you to plan your communication strategies accordingly. For example, if you know that your supervisor or another department manager hates small talk and likes to cut to the chase, then be prepared for that scenario. Sometimes the person will allow you to make your case, but other times they will want to begin by asking questions. Knowing what to anticipate from the other person helps you to construct the most persuasive arguments. This also suggests that you must be able to demonstrate your knowledge of the issue and to address different perspectives. Communicating in an informed, assertive way builds your competence and confidence and makes a positive outcome more likely. Arguing for your position takes persuasive skill, which requires practice. This does not come naturally for very many people, so it is a great idea to practice the negotiation with a colleague or family member.

Research suggests that when relationships are a priority in negotiation, higher relational capital can be an end result, even if the most economically feasible solution is not reached. Communication researchers also find that when employees perceive an open, task-oriented relationship with supervisors, they feel more confident in their ability to negotiate their work roles, resulting in higher job satisfaction and a reduction in role conflict.

Negotiating is often affiliated with the concept of interpersonal persuasion or your ability to persuade others to hold a certain belief or take a specific
action. Gaining compliance from others is an important skill. Another form of compliance gaining through the use of interpersonal persuasion is offering constructive feedback in an effort to get coworkers or supervisors to comply with your requests. More than likely, negotiating with supervisors and coworkers will involve constructive feedback. Employees need to determine specific ways to offer and receive constructive and sometimes not so constructive criticism as a natural part of work life, whether it is in negotiating, working in groups, or going through the performance appraisal process. The following section provides important advice for competently communicating constructive feedback.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Although frequently termed constructive criticism, constructive feedback constitutes communication intended to motivate others to change a process, procedure, or even a belief. Constructive feedback need not be critical in a negative sense, but can focus specifically on helping others grow in their organizational roles or correct a process or procedure that is not leading to success for the individual or the organization. The ability to provide constructive feedback is an important skill in organizations.

Developing constructive messages takes care, planning, and empathy. Many situational factors come into play such as the nature of the problem as well as the personalities involved, but the following guidelines can be used in a variety of circumstances.

- **Prepare a structure for your approach.** If you are engaging in a formal feedback session such as a performance appraisal, make sure you prepare a structured approach for the process. This might involve forms that you and the other person prepare, as well as outlets for responding, especially in the case of a disagreement.
- **Be specific in describing the problem or behavior, including consequences.** When communicating with someone about a specific issue such as a mistake in a procedure or a personnel issue such as tardiness, be direct in delivering the message and be sure to provide examples of the behavior as well as the impact it has on other people or the business in general. Avoid directing the critique at the person, and instead describe the behavior. You can still promote a strong interpersonal relationship while also being direct. A study by Asmub found that when supervisors avoid presenting constructive feedback as socially problematic, they are better able to communicate the issues directly and allow for more positive interaction with the other person.
- **Allow for two-way communication.** Competently and carefully resolving conflict involves two-way communication in which both parties are able to discuss the issue openly. How the recipient receives the feedback is often connected to how the supervisor feels about the social implications of delivering criticism. According to Asmub an “interview preparation form can be designed

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**Constructive feedback:** Communication intended to motivate others to change a process, procedure, or even a belief.
in a way that helps the supervisor produce negative feedback in an unproblematic way” (p. 425). This can be done by allowing both the supervisor and the employee to write down criticism prior to meeting.

- **Focus on solutions.**
  Another important element of providing constructive feedback is to work with the other employee on solutions for the problem. Many times feedback takes the form of growth feedback, in other words, a discussion of specific mechanisms or procedures can be developed to assist the employee and the organization to grow and improve. This also allows for two-way communication and becomes a negotiation of sorts geared toward growth, not necessarily correction. By focusing on solutions, all parties will feel empowered to resolve the issues and good will results.

- **Be concrete about expectations and goals.**
  Once solutions are developed, consider setting goals, time frames, and expectations about when the issue will be revisited. Formal performance interviews allow for scheduled follow-ups, but there are less formal strategies such as adding deadlines to joint calendars or planning to touch base with someone via e-mail.

Successfully delivering feedback is an important skill that requires a high degree of consideration in terms of how to construct the best messages to gain compliance. Strong interpersonal relationships and negotiation skills go a long way toward facilitating growth. Employees and supervisors should be vigilant at constructing supportive messages that help to create a positive work climate where all individuals strive to do their best work for the organization and for one another. The next section of this chapter provides specific types of messages you can use to create positive relational climates.

**Developing Supportive Communication Climates**

Being a savvy negotiator and a skilled giver and receiver of constructive feedback are key elements in maintaining positive communication climates. Whereas *organizational climate* is made up of many factors, it is simply the way

![Supportive messages create a positive work environment where everyone strives to do their best.](image-url)
Receiving Constructive Criticism

Receivers, too, must play a complementary role to the critic for criticism to be optimally useful. Receivers must resist being dogmatic, rigid, or overly ego involved with their work. Dogmatism includes characteristics of stubbornness and superiority. Rigidness is manifested by an unwillingness to change, adapt, or embrace flexibility. Superiority is seen when others’ judgments are ignored, dismissed, or evaded based on the receiver’s assumption that the person whose work is being critiqued knows better than any critic(s).

Too often, people instantly reject an idea, phrasing, or strategy without truly listening attentively to the entire comment. Sometimes, critical receivers hear what they want to hear or what they expect to hear, rather than what was, in fact, said. This is why tone and perceived critical motive are crucial: to allow greater opportunity to calmly listen to criticism.

Sometimes critical discourse results in statements like: “This is not what I want to do” when offered suggestions. All suggestions do not have to be followed; however, when the critic is a thoughtful, representative member of your eventual audience, it is wise to give added weight to implicit messages that your premise, intention, or strategy may be flawed. Remember, your work needs to be audience centered, and what you want to do or how you plan to do it will be ineffective if they are not consistent with audience needs, expectations, and abilities.

If one asks for criticism, that request needs to be honestly sought and graciously received. Receivers are never obliged to alter their beliefs, values, or behaviors; criticism is to be offered, not forced on receivers. Receivers, like critics, need to pay attention to the tone, timing, and context of the critical act.

Constructive criticism, in its best sense, is a way to solicit and provide others with measures of success, with ways to improve on past or future performances, and with affirmation, support, and encouragement. Quality constructive criticism implicitly recognizes worth in receivers’ work; it also builds a positive goodwill bond when improvement assistance and support are offered; and it adds to performers’ credibility by demonstrating willingness to adapt, to be flexible, and to be concerned with audience expectations and needs.

Criticism is vital to build a reciprocal, symbiotic, and respectful community. Critics need to be honest, direct, and civil; receivers need to be flexible, adaptable, and audience centered. When these qualities are present, idea sharing is indeed pleasurable and utilitarian.


Climate quite literally relates to the temperature and feel of a workplace, and it is said to be a shared perception by most people in the organization. In addition to organizational climates, each relationship also has a climate that can be positive or negative. The positive and negative nature of a climate is determined by the types of messages exchanged. In 1961, Gibb developed categories describing supportive and defensive organizational communication climates. Supportive climates are marked by descriptive, problem-focused, spontaneous, empathetic, equal, and provisional types of messages. On the other side of the spectrum, defensive climates are marked by messages that are evaluative, controlling, strategic, neutral, superior, and certain. Read the following descriptions for examples of each.

Descriptive Messages

Descriptive messages focus on describing issues that have occurred as opposed to stating an evaluation. Consider how this might fit within the relationship of a student and teacher. A teacher who uses descriptive communication when grading a paper will offer a student specific, constructive feedback on
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<th>Supportive Messages</th>
<th>Defensive Messages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Evaluative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consider making this report more formal by adding titles</td>
<td>This report reflects badly on you. You need to work on</td>
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<tr>
<td>and section headings.</td>
<td>being more professional in your writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem Focused</td>
<td>Controlling</td>
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<td>The deadline for this report has just been moved up to</td>
<td>Clear your schedule today, we have a new deadline that</td>
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<tr>
<td>the end of the workday today, would you mind clearing</td>
<td>you need to meet.</td>
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<tr>
<td>your schedule to assist me?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spontaneous</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
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<td>We are sponsoring a table at the health fair this</td>
<td>Are you busy on Saturday?</td>
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<td>Saturday. Are you available to staff the table for a</td>
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<td>couple of hours?</td>
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<td>Empathetic</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>I understand why you feel frustrated when Sheila</td>
<td>Oh well, some people are more attention starved than</td>
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<td>constantly complains about how much work she’s doing,</td>
<td>others. That’s life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>as if you have nothing to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Superior</td>
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<td>You have great ideas for the marketing plan. Do you</td>
<td>Don’t bother making suggestions for the marketing plan,</td>
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<td>mind to share them with the committee?</td>
<td>the committee has a lot of training and it’s really their</td>
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<td></td>
<td>project to be concerned with.</td>
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<td>Provisional</td>
<td>Certain</td>
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<tr>
<td>When we worked on this project three years ago, the vice</td>
<td>The vice president did not approve of our revision to</td>
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<td>president never approved our final draft.</td>
<td>the project.</td>
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problems identified, whereas a teacher who uses evaluative communication might simply state, “This is poor work” or “Wrong answer.” Clearly, describing the problem is more helpful for communicating areas for improvement.

### Problem-Focused Messages

Second, positive communication climates are marked by **problem-focused messages**, as opposed to control-focused ones. Posing requests in a problem-focused way makes it clear to the other person that there is an issue that needs a resolution. Control messages serve to command others to act. If a supervisor needs assistance with a project, it is much more competent to say, “I have a deadline coming up on the expansion proposal, could you assist

**Problem-focused message:** Message that poses a request by focusing on how to solve problems together, as opposed to a message that communicates control over another person.

Why should you use a descriptive message rather than an evaluation of the problem?
me?” as opposed to “You will help with this project, ASAP.” Or, when a manager develops and distributes a new policy, it is more problem focused to provide a rationale and explain the problems it addresses. A control message would stipulate that the new policy must be followed, no questions asked.

**Spontaneous Messages**

Another interesting quality of supportive messages includes *spontaneous communication* as opposed to strategic communication. When we communicate spontaneously we seek to convey our thoughts and messages in a way that indicates sincerity and objectivity. When we plan messages in advance in an effort to manipulate others or when we carry hidden agendas, we speak in a way that intends to hide our motive. Many times, others will become suspicious of these messages and react negatively. You may experience this bluntly when a telemarketer calls you and asks, “How are you doing today?” when you know that there is another reason for the call. Another example is when a coworker asks if you will attend a meeting in his/her place, knowing that the meeting will be long and boring. Once you have experienced the true intention of the other person, you are likely to mistrust future requests. This is considered a very indirect form of communication.

**Empathetic Messages**

The fourth dimension of climate is communicating empathy as opposed to being neutral. **Empathy** is a very powerful skill that involves identifying with others on an emotional level. It is a way that we express caring for others and is a sign of our ability to see issues and events from other people's perspectives. When we remain neutral to certain topics or individuals, we are sending a message that we are indifferent to the needs of the other person. Consider the response you get from a coworker when you express frustration about having to work late for three days in a row. An empathetic response might sound something like this, “I know it’s really difficult for you and your family when you have to work overtime” as opposed to a more neutral response such as, “Today’s organizations expect employees to do what it takes. You win some, you lose some.” Clearly, empathetic responses recognize the emotion and difficulty of a person's situation, whereas the neutral response does not tailor the message to the concerns of the coworker.

**Messages of Equality**

Gibb’s next dimension is that of equality versus superiority. Treating others with equality is evidenced in the messages you receive from others. Speaking to others as equals involves recognizing the needs and rights of others. Speaking with an air of superiority sends the message that you are better than or more powerful than others. Even when employees do have more positional power and authority than others in the organization, it is not a license to treat others as such. Imagine that your boss is offering a critique of your work saying,
Give suggestions that convey the value and worth of the other person while explaining improvements that could be made.

“I know you thought your proposal was on track, but I’ve been here a lot longer than you, and it is not up to par.” This type of message conveys a sense that one person is superior to another. A different way to frame this message in a way that communicates equality might sound like, “Your proposal is a great start, but there are a few suggestions I have that would appeal to the board, would you like to meet to work on this together?” This message conveys the value and worth of the other person while being direct in explaining that improvements could be made.

Provisional Messages

Gibb’s final category for supportive and defensive messages includes speaking provisionally as opposed to with certainty. So many topics in life and business are uncertain, so it makes sense that we would communicate messages in a way that is provisional, or that allows for alternative meanings. When we speak provisionally, we add on a provision or statement that says our opinion may not always be correct. Provisional tags we place on statements include, “As I recall” or “Last year” or “When we last spoke.” When people speak with absolute certainty, they essentially claim to know all things, even when they are making an educated guess or an assumption. Phrases that communicate certainty send the message that you are right while others are wrong. For example, if a coworker says, “Jack is not in favor of your proposal,” they sound absolutely certain of Jack’s position. However, knowing another person’s position is not always an easy thing to ascertain. A more appropriate, provisional statement might sound like this, “The last time I spoke with Jack about your proposal he raised several concerns” or “Jack may not like some of your options, but he’s been known to change his mind.”

Provisional message:
Message that acts as a provision or statement indicating that there are multiple meanings or that our assessment of a situation may not always be correct.
Conclusion

This chapter focuses on a variety of interpersonal communication issues ranging from the types of relationships we have at work to specific ways we can navigate the interpersonal terrain through competent conflict negotiation, skillful use of constructive feedback, and genuine use of supportive messages. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Cora Sims has some food for thought as she debates how to develop a stronger relationship with her manager, while also maintaining strong relationships with her coworkers as they face severe budget cuts. Based on LMX theory, Cora needs to find ways to improve her communication and connections with her boss so that she can emerge as a member of his in-group. Doing so will allow her more input and flexibility in how she deals with the upcoming challenges. Furthermore, she has fostered strong relationships with her coworkers as informational, collegial,

By focusing on supportive messages, employees and managers work together in creating a positive climate. Positive climates focus not only on achieving goals but also on preserving relationships and making the workplace a meaningful place to spend your time.

### Giving Praise

Praise can be a powerful tool for motivating employees and coworkers and can go a long way toward creating positive communication climates. The following types of praise are described by Dr. Bob Nelson, president of Nelson Motivation, Inc.

1. **Personal praise** is considered by employees to be the most important type of praise. It consists of being verbally thanked one-on-one for doing good work, being specifically sought out for such praise by one's manager, or being commended for good work in front of others. The best personal praise is timely, sincere, and specific.

2. **Written praise** is the next most valued type of praise by employees. It, too, comes in several varieties, from a letter of commendation being added to an employee's personnel file to a written thank-you note. In past years, I've taken the time to write an individual letter to each of my employees, specifically listing highlights of their performance that I was proud of over the past year.

3. **Electronic praise** lets you leverage positive communication as it occurs in your daily work. In a recent online survey that I conducted, 28 percent of employees reported it's "extremely important" to them to have positive e-mail messages forwarded to them, and 65 percent said it's "extremely or very important" to be copied on positive e-mail messages.

4. **Public praise** can come in many ways. You can post positive letters from customers on a "Good News Bulletin Board" or even bring some key customers in house to acknowledge employees. Or use the company newsletter to name top performers or to thank project teams. Many companies have a year-end awards banquet to recognize individuals and groups. Bring such ceremonies alive with stories about people's successes and the obstacles that they had to overcome to achieve their goals.

5. **Indirect praise** uses any of the preceding communication when employees are not present, knowing that word will get back to them. For some employees, this form of recognition is the most credible because it is done without any return expectation.

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and special peers due in large part to the supportive communication climates she has developed through work projects but also through social events like the company softball team. All this provides her with more negotiating power when it comes to budget cuts. By knowing the personalities of different people in the organization and having perspective on the challenges, wants, and needs of different groups, Cora can develop specific strategies that can lead to more collaborative outcomes. The importance of interpersonal relationships at work cannot be overlooked by employees or managers.
ACTIVITIES

1. Describe the types of relationships you have experienced in a previous job. Identify which of these were mixed status and same status. What benefits did you gain from these relationships? Were there any problems or disadvantages that resulted? How would you describe strong coworker and supervisor relationships?

2. In reflecting on your relationship with a past or current supervisor, would you describe yourself as being a member of the supervisor’s in-group or out-group? What advantages or disadvantages did you experience based on this?

3. Identify your primary conflict management style. Do you always use this style when dealing with conflict? Under what circumstances might you consider using different approaches to managing conflict in an organization? What characteristics of a conflict situation are likely to influence the strategy you use?

4. After three rounds of successful interviews, you have just been offered a position at a prestigious accounting firm. You are aware of the salary range for the junior accountant position, but the firm’s offer comes in just under the low end of the range. How might you utilize the negotiation steps outlined in the chapter to obtain a higher salary?

5. Imagine that you are a supervisor preparing to give a performance appraisal to a high-performing and a low-performing employee. Develop a structure you would follow for providing feedback. What elements of constructive feedback would you incorporate? How might you prevent the appraisal from taking a negative turn?

6. Describe your experience in a toxic or a supportive communication climate at work. What types of messages were exchanged? Identify whether these messages were supportive or defensive. Provide a specific example of a memorable defensive message and rewrite the statement as more supportive according to Gibb’s categories.
REFERENCES


