

It was just another class assignment for Karen, but it changed her life. The first homework assignment I give my communication students is to be more spacious—more accepting and nonjudgmental—in their conversational listening. I coach them to punctuate their daily conversations with periods of silence as they listen to others. Rather than verbally interrupt a speaker with judgment, advice, encouragement, or questions every twelve seconds, which seems to be the norm for my students, they are to listen without any interruptions for thirty seconds or more, whatever students feel is appropriate for the speaker, the topic, and the flow of the discussion. “I thought this assignment would be boring—to listen so long without saying anything,” Karen began. “But I tried it out on my mom last night and it was wonderful! I would normally interrupt her after a few seconds, give my opinion, and then just walk away. “But last night was different! I let her talk for long periods of time without interrupting, just like we practiced in class. At times, I kept quiet for thirty seconds, and one or two minutes at other times. Sometimes even longer. It was so weird. But she really opened up during our talk. In fact, she talked about things I’ve never heard before—about Dad, her job, and how she feels about me.” “So, your mom said things she normally wouldn’t tell you?” I asked. 12 CREATING COMMUNICATION “I think she’s always wanted to say these things, but I was the one who wasn’t listening,” Karen admitted. “This assignment forced me to pay attention to her for a change. I feel like I’ve created a whole new relationship with her.” “What a wonderful creation,” I said. “I feel like I made something really important happen.” “Almost like an artist,” I chuckled. “Yeah, like an artist of communication!” she concluded. YOU ARE AN ARTIST OF COMMUNICATION Whether or not you realize it, you are an artist, and your life is the canvas on which you will create your greatest work. Your most important creation will not be a painting, a sculpture, or a book. Rather, it will be the person you become during this lifetime. Your greatest work will ultimately find its form and structure in the blending of the broad brush strokes of your family, relationships, career, and education. More important, it will be textured and imbued with the thousands upon thousands of finer, more delicate brush strokes of every word and action you paint each day on the canvas of your life. It will be these smaller brush strokes during your everyday life—the way you treat your loved ones, the manner in which you interact with people at school, work, and in your neighborhood, and even the way you greet strangers—that will most significantly determine the kind of person you become. As an artist of communication, you help to create the atmosphere within which your interactions with others occur. Whether it’s a quick smile to a stranger, a heartfelt speech at a wedding reception, or a minute of attentive silence when a loved one is speaking, you are creating the masterpiece of your life moment by moment. Now, you may be saying to yourself that “I’m no artist” or “Art is for those who are trained or gifted.” But that’s not true. We are all creative, often consciously selecting the words, behaviors, circumstances, responses, and attitudes we bring to our communication interactions with the people in our lives. Artist Edgar Whitney proclaims that “Every human being has creative powers. You were born to create. Unleash your creative energy and let it flow.” Accept this gentle challenge to create more effective communication in your life and let your creative powers flow. Every day you talk, listen, and interact with others. Most of the time, you speak and listen more out of habit than anything else, not even vaguely aware of your role in the communication process. But I’m inviting you not only to become more aware and skilled in those fundamental communication skills, but also to become more creative in

the ways in which you think, speak, listen, and interact with others. Creating Effective Communication in Your Life 3 If you don't, you may be limiting your opportunities to effectively connect with people. You may even be limiting your opportunities to develop as a person. Author Thomas Moore warns against our reluctance and maybe even our fears of becoming artists in our everyday lives: "When we leave art only to the accomplished painter and the museum, instead of fostering our own artful sensibilities in every aspect of daily life, then our lives lose opportunities for soul." Rather than being unconscious, unconcerned, or disillusioned about how you communicate with others, take up this invitation to become an artist of communication and create more effective communication in your lives. Your acceptance, however, to create more effective communication will not necessarily guarantee success in every interaction. Human communication is much too complicated and involved. There are thousands of unconscious non-verbal behaviors involved in even a single conversation and we are usually aware of only a few of them during the course of the conversation. The same holds true for the verbal dimension of that same conversation. The hundreds of thousands of words in our language and the millions of possible arrangements of those words are equally staggering. There is no possible way we can consciously choose the perfect words and the perfect sentences for every thought and feeling we wish to communicate. Verbal and nonverbal communication are also governed by habit. It is easier to say hello and smile as we pass others than it is to create a unique and special greeting for each and every person. Effective communication requires that much of our interaction with others be governed by habit. Otherwise, communication would be too dense, clumsy, and overwhelming. Even if we could select the perfect words, sentences, and behaviors to communicate, there is no guarantee that the recipient of the message would interpret the words and the behaviors in the way we intended. The process of human communication cannot be as intentional and predictable as the brush strokes on canvas or the careful shaping of clay. We cannot control the viewers' interpretation when they "see" our painting or statue. But in communication with others, you can choose to be more aware of, sensitive to, and selective of your words and behaviors. Your decision to consciously participate in the way you speak and listen to others will open the doors to more effective communication. As Karen learned, even one change in her communication behavior—listening without interrupting—created more space for her mother to share. This one change created a wonderful change in their relationship.

THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

Let's begin with an examination of communication itself, for it is communication that enables us to experience our lives and share experiences with others. The 4 CREATING COMMUNICATION late-night talks, the laughter, the gentle touches, the tears, the encouragement, and the thousands upon thousands of other communication acts all combine to create what you experience as life. Our communication with others is not a little thing. It is life itself. All the arts we practice are mere apprenticeship. The big art is our life. —M. C. RICHARDS

The importance of communication cannot be overstated. Family therapist Virginia Satir has suggested that "Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the single most important factor determining what kinds of relationships he makes and what happens to him in the world." Satir continues by stating in no uncertain terms that "How he manages his survival, how he develops intimacy, and how he makes sense of his world are largely dependent upon his communication skills." So, what exactly is communication? Let's define

communication in a way that emphasizes your creative involvement in the communication process. Communication is the process whereby we create and exchange messages. Any activity can be viewed as a thing or a process. A thing is static, time bound, and unchanging. A process is moving, continually changing, with no beginning or end. In our definition, communication is a process—something that is continually changing. Individual words, sentences, and gestures have no meaning in isolation. They make sense only when viewed as parts of an ongoing, dynamic process. To fully understand the process of communication, we must notice how what we say and do influences and affects what the other person says and does. We must pay attention to the changes we experience and how these changes influence and affect our perception, interpretation, and interactions with others, from moment to moment, year to year, and decade to decade. Similarly, we also need to be sensitive to the ongoing changes in those we communicate with because they are changing too. Communication is alive, and to fully appreciate it requires that we view it as a dynamic, fluid, and continually changing process.

Creating Messages Language in any culture contains thousands if not hundreds of thousands of words to select from and arrange in endless combinations to form the basic structures of verbal communication. There are even more subtle and not-so-subtle nonverbal (or nonlanguage) communication behaviors that can be added to the mix. It is our ability to create messages from the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication that truly distinguishes us from all other forms of life. Our **Creating Effective Communication in Your Life** 5 ability to create communication not only is the most significant way humans differ from animals and plants, but it also may be one of the deepest and strongest drives within us—to express and share who we are. What more powerful and significant way to express who and what we are than by communicating our thoughts and feelings with others?

Exchanging Messages After selecting the words, sentences, and nonverbal cues to form the thought or feeling we are attempting to communicate, we send the message to the recipient, who processes the message and gives a response in the form of feedback. The recipient's role in the communication process is also a creative process, because what he or she selectively perceives and interprets from the original message will determine the meaning of the message for him or her. The message recipient then creates a response from all the words and nonverbal behaviors available. Receiving and creating a response is just as important as creating and sending the original message.

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION The communication process has two forms—verbal and nonverbal. Both forms usually operate together in the majority of messages you send and receive. Verbal communication is all spoken and written communication. A mother whispering reassuring words to a child, a speaker addressing an audience of five thousand, or a sunbather reading a book on the beach is utilizing verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is all communication that is not spoken or written. It is your body type, voice, facial expressions, gestures, movement, clothing, and touch. It is your use of distance, use of time, and the environment you create. It is your laughter, your tears, your gentle touch, your relaxed breathing, the car you drive, and the color of your pen. All these things and countless others make up your nonverbal communication. Verbal communication and nonverbal communication enable you and me to communicate. They provide all that is necessary for the process of connecting, and it is our privilege to use them creatively, effectively, and meaningfully.

COMPONENTS

OF COMMUNICATION Even though the following seven components of communication operate almost instantaneously, we will examine them separately to more clearly understand their specific function. The seven components are source, message, receiver, encoding, channel, decoding, and context.

6 CREATING COMMUNICATION

Source The source is the originator of the message. It is the person or persons who want to communicate a message to another person or a group of people. The source of a message can be an individual speaker addressing a group, a child asking for candy, a couple sending out invitations to a family reunion, or a person writing a letter.

Message The message is the idea, thought, or feeling that the source wants to communicate. This message is encoded or converted into verbal and nonverbal symbols that will most likely be understood by the receiver.

Receiver The receiver is the recipient of the message. The receiver can be an individual or a group of people. Once the receiver hears the words and receives the nonverbal cues from the sender, she must interpret or decode them if communication is to occur.

Encoding Once the source has decided on a message to communicate, he must encode or convert that idea, thought, or feeling into verbal and nonverbal symbols that will be most effectively understood by the receiver. This encoding process can be extremely creative because there are unlimited ways for the source to convert the idea or feeling into words and behaviors. Consider a simple message such as "I want to see you again." The source can simply say, "I want to see you again," and smile as he says the words. He can also say, "Let's get together again," and cast a humorous glance, or he can murmur, "I need to see you again," with direct eye contact and outstretched arms. He could simply scribble a note on a napkin saying, "We need an encore," and place it gently in front of the other person. There are countless ways to encode this simple message and each one would be received and interpreted by the recipient in a slightly different way. The important thing to remember is that you can open yourself up to the endless possibilities of selecting, arranging, and delivering messages you want to communicate. Your willingness to put greater creativity into the encoding process will enhance and deepen your communication with others.

Channel A channel is the medium by which the message is communicated. The source can utilize the channels of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. For instance, if you want to communicate affection for another person, you can utilize a variety of channels or combination of channels. You can say, "I like you" (sound). You can give a hug (touch). You can wink an eye (sight). You can send cookies that you baked (taste). Or you can deliver a dozen roses (smell). You can creatively select the channels of communication to productively communicate your message.

Decoding Decoding is the process of making sense out of the message received. The receiver must decipher the language and behaviors sent by the source so they will have meaning. After the receiver decodes the message, the receiver (now the source) can encode a return message and send it back to the other person.

Context All communication occurs within a certain context. The context is made up of the physical surroundings, the occasion in which the communication occurs, the time, the number of people present, noise level, and many other variables that can influence and affect the encoding and decoding of messages. The context plays an important role in the communication process. As you consider the effects that the context can have on communication, you might want to put your creativity to good use. Think of ways you can create a serene, healthy, and productive communication environment. Simple things like choosing a time when

you both have an opportunity to meet. Making the actual physical surroundings clean, uncluttered, and peaceful. Maybe straightening up the house, buying some flowers to cheer the place up, and even putting on some soothing background music. Perhaps a drive in the country or a walk in a park will create a more relaxed context in which you can communicate more effectively. Whatever you do, remember that you can have some influence over the context in which communication occurs within your life.

MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

Models provide a concrete way to see how concepts and processes work. We'll look at three communication models that show how the various communication components interact. Although models help simplify the complex process of communication, keep in mind that they only represent reality. Models are like words. Words are not reality. They cannot tell us everything about an object or event. For instance, the word "apple" is not an actual apple. You cannot slice or eat the word "apple" as you can a real one. The word "apple" does not tell you everything about an apple either—the smell, the coloring, the texture, the taste, the degree of ripeness, and whether or not the price sticker is still glued to the skin. Like words, these three models of communication are not reality. They cannot begin to tell us everything about the processes they are intended to describe. However, they are extremely valuable in helping us visualize and understand the process of human communication.

8 CREATING COMMUNICATION

Linear Model

One of the simplest models of communication was advanced by C. E. Shannon and W. Weaver in 1949. Their conceptualization represents a message-centered view of communication that is linear in design. This model has a source sending a message through a channel to a receiver, a process similar to a telephone. Shannon and Weaver introduced a component labeled noise to represent any interference to the fidelity of the message, such as physical noise from other people's loud talking or internal noise such as multiple meanings for a word contained in the message. The linear model of communication, shown below, is a "one-way" model because it fails to depict the receiver's feedback or response.

CHANNEL

The linear model is useful for pointing out the basic elements of the communication process, but it is far too simple to describe the complexity of the process. It shows only the flow of messages from the sender to the receiver, but not the receiver's response.

Interactional Model

Communication involves more than the message transmission portrayed in the linear model. The feedback must be taken into account. Feedback is the process of sending information from the receiver back to the source. The source uses this feedback to adjust her message based on what the receiver communicated. The source's modification of the original message is called adaptation. The illustration below shows how feedback and adaptation operate in the interactional model of communication. The source sends a message to the receiver, the receiver responds with feedback, and the source adapts her message until the message is successfully communicated.

9 CREATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Again, this model is too simple to accurately reflect the communication process.

Transactional Model

Often, messages are sent and received simultaneously, and the "source" and "receiver" may be one or more individuals. In fact, these individuals are more accurately described as communicators, individuals who simultaneously send and receive messages. This is one of the primary characteristics of the transactional model of communication. The most important idea of the transactional model is that communication operates systemically. A system is a collection of interdependent parts arrayed in such a way that a change in one

of its components will affect changes in all the other components. In the transactional model, the various components or parts of communication are not viewed as independent of one another, but as interdependent. A change in one produces a change in all the others. The systemic view presented in the transactional model, shown below, includes the basic components of the first two models, yet also considers the context in which communication occurs, the number of people involved, the background of those individuals, and the simultaneity of the source and receiver roles. Communication never takes place in a vacuum, but in a specific context or environmental setting. To understand a communication event, we need to know where and under what circumstances people are communicating, because these have a major influence on the individuals involved. For example, discussing vacation plans in the comfort of your own living room with a friend would be entirely different from discussing them in the front row of a rock concert or during a funeral service. Although communication often occurs between two people, there are many times when more than two individuals are involved. The addition of even one person to a conversation between two people can dramatically change its outcome. A speaker will have a very different speaking experience addressing an audience of five colleagues than facing an audience of five thousand. The number of people affects the communication event.

10 CREATING COMMUNICATION

The backgrounds of the individuals involved—the cultural, psychological, physical, gender, age, and other demographic differences and similarities— influence the communication. Do the individuals speak the same language? How might gender affect communication styles and responses? Will age differences influence the interpretation of a message? What will be the effect of educational differences? What about cultural differences? Unlike the earlier models of communication, the transactional model does not make a distinction between the source and the receiver. In reality, you are sending and receiving messages simultaneously and continually as you communicate with others. As you are speaking, you are also receiving information from the listener. You see her nodding, shifting posture, and smiling. As you are listening to her response, you are simultaneously sending messages with your diverted gaze, slouching posture, and audible yawn. This simultaneous nature of communication transactions allows you to modify or change the messages you are sending even as you speak. A change in one element of a system can bring about a change in the other elements. The important thing to remember about the transactional model is that the individuals communicating have an impact on each other. In this respect, what and how you communicate—your choice of words and actions—can influence and change others. Remember Karen? Her mother shared more deeply because Karen listened in a new way. Karen's perception of the event may be that her mother changed. But Karen also changed. She not only changed her listening behavior, but she also became more open to her mother, more knowledgeable of her mother's life, more accepting, and perhaps a bit more loving. The relationship changed for both women because Karen chose to create a different listening environment for her mother. Keep in mind your creative influence as you speak and listen to others.

PERCEPTION

To more fully understand communication, we must recognize the importance of perception. Perception is the process by which we assign meaning to a stimulus. Or put another way, perception is giving meaning to the things we see and experience. If an attractive stranger smiles at you at a party, what do you immediately think? Is the person simply being polite and acknowledging you? Recognizing you

from somewhere else? Actually smiling at the person behind you? Maybe even flirting with you? Or perhaps the person is experiencing intestinal gas pains and is attempting to hide the discomfort? What's your guess? These are just a few meanings we can assign to that stimulus.

Creating Effective Communication in Your Life

11 Selection

The process of perception involves our five senses. We see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. From these five senses we take in the stimuli of the world. It's from these five senses that we receive information to make sense of our lives. Because we are exposed to much more stimuli than we could ever manage, the first step in perception is to select which stimuli to attend to. In other words, we don't attend to every stimulus that is present at any given moment. Even in the location where you're reading this book, if you were to count each stimulus in your field of vision, the number would be in the thousands, perhaps the tens of thousands. To pay attention to each stimulus at the same moment would be impossible. So you have to decide—do you select the words in this sentence or gaze at your left foot? Each selection changes your focus of vision. You can't select all the things, so you must select a few.

Interpretation

Once we have selected our perceptions, the second step is to interpret them in a way that makes sense to us. Interpretation is the act of assigning meaning to a stimulus. It plays a role in every communication act we encounter. Is a friend's humorous remark intended to express fondness or irritation? Does your supervisor's request for an immediate meeting with you communicate trouble or a pay raise? When an acquaintance says, "Let's do lunch," is the invitation serious or not?

Almost every communication act we encounter involves some level of interpretation on our part. Let's examine some factors that influence our perception.

To paint beautifully, you must first see the beauty in the object you are painting.

—GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

Physical factors.

The most obvious factors that influence our interpretation are physical. What is the condition of our five senses? Can we see accurately or do we need glasses? Can we hear sufficiently or is our hearing diminished by age? Can we smell and taste sharply or are allergies causing difficulties? Can you touch and feel with adequate sensitivity or do clothing and gloves make it hard? The time of day affects how we physically process the sensory input. Are you more awake in the morning or late at night? Some people are most alert and attentive in the morning, while others come alive late at night. Your general state of health can influence interpretation. When you are ill, hungry, or depressed, you see and experience a very different world than when you are healthy, well fed, and cheerful. Age also can affect your interpretation. Older people view the world and events with a great deal more experience than do younger people. By simply having lived longer, older people have generally been through more of life's developmental stages—early adulthood, parenthood, grandparenthood, retirement. Younger people, on the other hand, usually have much more physical energy and time to play, explore, and investigate the world around them. With fewer life experiences, younger people interpret life differently. Other physical factors are fatigue, hunger, stress, monthly biological cycles, diet, and exercise. Our bodies play an important role in our interpretation of the world.

Psychological factors.

The second category of factors that influence interpretation is psychological or mental. For example, education and knowledge affect how we see the world around us. An individual who never went beyond the seventh grade sees a much different world than an individual who has completed law school. A trained botanist sees a forest far differently than does a first-grader. Past

experiences also affect how we interpret perceptions. Someone who grew up happily on a farm may view rural environments very differently than someone who grew up in New York City. A victim of robbery may be more fearful of a darkened street than someone who has never experienced a crime. An individual who grew up in a loving, stable family may have a more positive view of raising children than a person who grew up in a cold, unstable family. Assumptions about people and the world in general influence interpretations also. A belief that people are basically good and honest, or basically untrustworthy and self-serving, will affect how we view the actions of others. Finally, moods will influence how we interpret the things we see and experience. When we are feeling successful and competent, we see a very different world than when we are feeling sad, lonely, and depressed. Cultural factors. A person's cultural background can affect and influence his or her interpretation of the world. Chapter 5 is devoted to intercultural communication and the role culture plays in how we communicate with those who are different from us. For now, we'll just briefly mention some cultural factors that influence perception. Every culture has its own worldview, language, customs, rituals, artifacts, traditions, and habits. These factors not only affect how people perceive and interact with one another within a given culture, but also they influence how they interact with people of different cultures. Culture can shape and determine how an individual sees the world. Americans interpret direct eye contact as a sign of confidence, honesty, and politeness, whereas Japanese interpret the same direct eye contact as rude and confrontational. People from Middle Eastern countries often converse within a few inches of each other's face, whereas Americans would find such closeness a violation of personal space. For Americans, the "okay" sign made with the thumb and the forefinger is a sign that everything is fine, but in many cultures it is an obscene gesture. Position in space. The final factor that influences perception is position in space. Where we are determines how we see things. For instance, if you sit at the back of a classroom, you will perceive a very different environment than if you sit in the front row, right under the nose of the lecturer. The same holds true for adult interaction with children. You will perceive children differently if you kneel down to their eye level rather than stand over them. You even pay higher prices for better viewing positions. Think of the last concert, sporting event, or resort you attended or visited. The closer seats or the rooms with a view generally cost more. Perception Checking Because so many factors influence perception, what can we do to create more effective communication? Perception checking is a method for inviting feedback on our interpretations. Perception checking involves three steps: 1. An observation of a particular behavior. 2. Two possible interpretations of that behavior. 3. A request for clarification about how to interpret that behavior. Many times people observe and interpret the behavior, and that's the end of it. Often their interpretations can be easily and readily corrected with a simple perception check. Here are two examples of how perception checking works: "I noticed you haven't been in class for the past two weeks. (observed behavior) I wasn't sure whether you've been sick (first interpretation) or were dropping the class. (second interpretation) What's up?" (request for clarification) "You walked right past me without saying hello. (observed behavior) It makes me curious if you're mad at me (first interpretation) or just in a hurry. (second interpretation) How are you feeling?" (request for clarification)

Often, perception checking is more to the point. You may not want to use all three steps: “I see you rolling your eyes at me. (observed behavior) What’s the matter?” (invitation for clarification) “Are you certain you want to go to the movies? (request for clarification) You don’t act like you’re too enthusiastic.” (observed behavior) 14 CR EAT ING Comm UNICAT ION Perception checking can be a simple technique for clarifying communication behavior in a way that is not threatening or confrontational. It simply asks for clarification. PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNICATION Certain generally accepted truths or principles of communication are important to consider when communicating with others. These principles hold true for all people in every culture. By understanding these principles, you will experience greater communication effectiveness. Communication Is Constant You cannot not communicate. In other words, you are always communicating. Too often we think that if we are not talking, we are not communicating. You may not be communicating verbally, but your nonverbal communication is constantly displaying signs and cues that reflect what you are thinking and feeling internally. Your posture, gestures, facial expressions, clothing, use of time, and even the car you drive are just a few of the nonverbal messages that others perceive and interpret. Even when you are speaking, your tone of voice, rate of speech, pitch, volume, pauses or lack of pauses, and vocal fillers such as “ah” and “um” are some of the nonverbal behaviors that can convey what you’re thinking and feeling beneath the level of language. You’re always communicating. Communication Is Transactional Communication can be viewed as a transaction in which the meanings of messages are negotiated between people. Unlike the earlier linear and interactional models, which view communication as primarily sending and receiving intact and unchanging messages, the transactional model considers to a greater extent the complexities of the individuals involved, the environment, and the influence the communicators have on one another. At a deeper level, the transactional nature of communication encourages us to regard others and ourselves in a much more complex way. We can no longer view the receiver of our messages as a receptacle in which we deposit our thoughts and feelings with little or no message distortion. The transactional nature of communication creates a more other-centered awareness and sensitivity to others. No longer can we be limited to our earlier preoccupation with getting our message across. Instead, we shift our focus from self to other to participate equally in communication exchanges or transactions in which the receiver is regarded with greater sensitivity and respect. Creating Effective Communication in Your Life 15 Communication Is a Process The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that you never step twice into the same river. What he meant was that a river is never exactly the same as it continually twists and turns, constantly changing in depth and speed, as it flows in its journey from the snowcapped mountains to the sea hundreds of miles away. Communication is a process like a river. It is continuous and always changing. You can begin to understand and appreciate communication only when you view the individual words, sentences, and gestures of communication as a part of an ongoing process. One sentence or gesture may hold very little meaning in and of itself. But viewed from a larger, more dynamic process perspective, the sentence or gesture takes on a different meaning. To understand the process of communication, we need to consider how our words and actions influence and affect the recipient of our message. We, the creators of these messages, are also in process. How we perceive the world and communicate with others when we first

get up in the morning can be vastly different from how we perceive and communicate during the late hours of evening. From moment to moment, like a river, we twist and turn, constantly changing the depth of our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings as we travel from morning to evening. From year to year, decade to decade, we change dramatically in our interests, beliefs, fears, and desires. What spoke to our ears and hearts in our youth may not ring true in our middle and later years. We are constantly changing. Communication Is Irreversible “Forget I said that.” “I’m sorry I did that. Let’s pretend it never happened.” We have all issued statements like these in an attempt to erase or diminish the impact of an angry word or action. Even though the other person agreed to forget or dismiss the statement or behavior, the memory of a careless word or deed can last a lifetime. I’m sure you can recall a stinging criticism or hurtful act you experienced during childhood. The memory of the criticism or act can linger and haunt you many years later. Likewise, uplifting, positive, and healing words and deeds can also be carried in the hearts and minds of others forever. I remember my father waking me before sunrise and taking me to the local café in our farming community when I was four years old. He would carry me sleepy eyed to the counter where he would plop me down on a stool and announce to the other farmers, “This is my boy!” Many a predawn breakfast at the Coyote Cafe began with his proud announcement and the other farmers’ chiding chorus of “We know, Mike. We know.” More than four decades have passed since those predawn breakfasts, but I’ll never forget my dad’s pride and love as he carried me into that café and proudly announced, “This is my boy.”

16 CR EATING COMMUNICATION Your every word and deed can leave an indelible imprint on the minds and hearts of others. Be conscious of your choices as you create messages to others. Communication Is Learned Research suggests that crying and laughing are interpreted similarly by peoples of all cultures. But more often than not, our communication patterns and behaviors are learned. The language we acquire, the extent of our vocabulary, the way we speak, our gestures, eye contact, our touching, and how we dress are just a few of the many examples of learned communication behavior. Communication is also learned in a cultural context that is so pervasive and extensive that we are often unaware of it. We mistakenly assume that “our” way of communicating and expressing is the “right” way and all the other cultures are wrong. This notion of ethnocentrism is explored in chapter 5, but for now, we need only appreciate the fact that most people view their way of communicating as the “right” way. The principle that communication is learned suggests also that communication can be unlearned and new ways of communicating acquired. This is most exciting because then we can replace our ineffective and unhealthy ways of speaking, listening, and behaving with more effective and healthy ways. Because we did not learn to communicate in effective and healthy ways does not mean we are condemned to this fate for the rest of our lives.

Communication Is Creative The last principle of communication is that it is creative. This creativity is much broader than the creativity associated with art, music, and poetry. It is the creativity expressed in your daily communication, in the unique and special ways you communicate: When you choose to be silent. The way you listen. The times you choose to speak. The words you select from your vocabulary palette and the sentences you create. The combinations of facial expressions, gestures, movements, and postures Your life has been your art. You have set yourself to music and your days are your sonnets. —OSCAR WILDE you choose to express your thoughts and feelings. The letters you send.

The telephone calls you make. The clothes you wear. The car you drive. The room you decorate. The home you live in. These are just some of the ways you create communication in your life. Your communication and the impact it has on others does not just happen. You make it happen. You decide whether or not to return a phone call. You decide whether or not to respond to a lunch invitation. You decide whether to respond in kindness or in anger to a criticism leveled your way. You create by choosing one behavior and not another. You are always creating something in your communication life