



## Effective Interpersonal/Intrateam Communication

<http://www.foundationcoalition.org>

### Definition

A team is a **small group** of people with **complementary skills** who are committed to a **common purpose, performance goals, and approach** for which they hold themselves **mutually accountable**.<sup>1</sup> Although student teams may not satisfy all the requirements of the definition, the degree to which they do often determines their effectiveness.

### Rationale

"Students do not come to school with all the social skills they need to collaborate effectively with others. Teachers need to teach appropriate communication, leadership, trust, decision making, and conflict management skills to students and provide the motivation to use these skills in order for groups to function effectively."<sup>2</sup> **Faculty members must take responsibility to help students develop their skills to participate on and lead teams.**

### Introduction

Multidisciplinary teams are the vehicle through which much of modern engineering is accomplished. Engineering graduates are expected to function effectively on multidisciplinary teams. [EC 2000] Communication, listening and speaking, is the core of the abilities required to function on teams. Therefore, faculty members are seeking ways to help students improve their communication skills. This document is intended to provide faculty members with material and activities with which they might work with their students. The document has three parts.

#### **How might communication occur?**

In the first part, information on how effective communication occurs is presented. The first part of the document addresses the following questions:

- What is interpersonal communication?
- What is intrateam communication?
- Why learn more about interpersonal and intrateam communication?
- How might I understand effective communication? The sender-message-channel-receiver (SMCR) model is presented as a way to help understand mechanisms underlying effective communication.

#### **How might interpersonal/intrateam communication be improved?**

After laying a foundation for better understanding of how effective communication occurs and of where possibilities for communication breakdowns might occur, then attention shifts to the skills required to perform effective communication. So the second part of the document addresses the following questions:

- How might I improve my ability to listen?
- Why and how might I balance inquiry and advocacy?
- How might I offer constructive feedback and constructive criticism?

#### **How might different groups use this document?**

Finally, suggestions for how individual students, student teams, and faculty members might apply the material in this document are offered.

### What is interpersonal communication?

Interpersonal communication is the process that we use to communicate our ideas, thoughts, and feelings to another person. Our interpersonal communication skills are learned behaviors that can be improved through knowledge, practice, feedback, and reflection.

### What is intrateam communication?

Intrateam communication is a process through which team members communicate with one another. It is made up of the communication strategies and styles of each member of the team. Like interpersonal communication skills, a team can improve its intrateam communication skills through knowledge, practice, feedback, and reflection.

### Why learn more about interpersonal and intrateam communication?

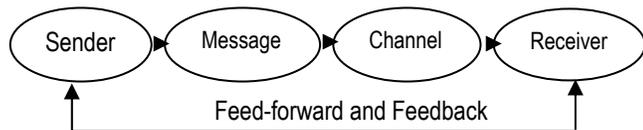
Listening, oral communication, interpersonal communication, and teamwork rank near the top of skills that employers seek in their new hires.<sup>3</sup> When you learn to communicate effectively with others, then more opportunities for successful team memberships are available to you.

Communication, the exchange of ideas and information, is the essence of how people interface with one another with regard to sharing ideas and working effectively together. Faulty communication lies at the heart of conflict, which may lead to ineffective communication. Over 90% of conflicts are attributed to faulty communication between sender and receiver.<sup>4</sup> However, when individuals and team members think about and choose their communication styles, then opportunities for miscommunication and the resulting conflict are reduced.

How you communicate impacts how others communicate within your team. How your team members communicate impacts the "thinking environment" of your team and its productivity and efficiency. Better understanding of the communication process, how we communicate, potential pitfalls in communication, and improving communication skills will help teams improve their performance and help team members improve their interpersonal communication skills.

## How might I understand effective communication?

Effective communication begins with first understanding how the communication process works. The sender-message-channel-receiver model<sup>5</sup> describes the communication process. The SMCR model is described pictorially below.



### The Sender

The sender has to be aware of six variables when communicating with another person.

- Sender's Communication Skills
- Sender's Attitudes
- Sender's Knowledge Level
- Sender's Social Position
- Sender's Culture
- Feedback Received by Sender

Each variable affects how we transmit our message and how the message will be received.

The **sender's communication skills** involve listening, speaking, writing, reading, nonverbal communication, thinking, and reasoning.

The **sender's attitudes** are defined as one's generalized tendency to feel one way or another about something. A typical unconscious internal process that an individual might use when communicating is (1) I ask if the person is judging me. (2) Is the person judging my issue, belief, idea, goal, etc., that I am trying to communicate? (3) Is the person worth listening to from my life perspective (biases)? (4) I decide to listen to the person from his/her perspective. What is important to understand about attitudes toward the receiver is that there is an internal unconscious dialogue occurring that often impedes the ability to send or receive. If this unconscious dialogue is not brought to the cognitive level, then it may impede effective communication.

**Sender's knowledge level** If we are knowledgeable and confident in our knowledge, then we convey our message far differently than if we do not know the content or are not confident in knowing the content.

**Sender's social position** What is the hierarchy of the team? Do people value what I have to communicate? If the team views the sender as a valuable team member, then the team will listen more earnestly.

**Sender's culture** Different cultures foster different communication styles, e.g., linear communicator (sequential order from start to finish) communicator, a circular communicator (context is within broader dialogue/story), or a spiral communicator (start from a broad perspective and narrow down to the point). There is no wrong communication style, but team members must learn that different cultures communicate differently. Without this realization, team members might mistakenly assume a member is not an effective communicator when the team member just communicates differently than expected.

Finally, the sender must be aware of **feedback** throughout the process of sending the message. Feedback allows us to determine the effectiveness of the communication. Does the receiver understand the message I am sending?

## The Message

The message has three components:

Content	Context	Treatment
---------	---------	-----------

**Content** is simply communicating what you desire to communicate. Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*, would ask, "Are you being impeccable with your words?"<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, in our enthusiasm to speak, we do not think about what we are saying.

**Context** involves adapting your presentation of the content to your audience. If you are speaking to a linear thinker, do not add a lot of "fluff" to your dialogue. If you are speaking to a person who wants to understand "the whole picture," add more detail to the context presentation.

**Treatment** is the arrangement or ordering of the content by the speaker. The treatment directly supports the context and content of the message.

### The Channel

There are two types of channels:

#### Sensory Channels

#### Institutional Channels

**Sensory channels** are based on the five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Social scientists have found the sender is more likely to gain the receiver's attention if the sender uses two or more sensory channels to send information.

**Institutional channels** are the chosen methods of disseminating information—face-to-face conversation, printed materials, and electronic media. Each institutional medium requires one or more of the sensory channels to carry the message from the sender to the receiver. For example, when we have a face-to-face conversation (an institutional medium), we use sight (gestures, expressions), sound (voice), and possibly touch, smell, and taste.

### The Receiver

The **receiver** of the information has to use the same skill set as the sender. Communication skills, attitudes, knowledge level, social positions, culture, and feedback are all important. Furthermore, the receiver has an additional variable: credibility of the speaker.

If the receiver perceives the sender as credible, objective, and having expertise in the topic being discussed, then the receiver is more likely to accept the message being sent. Therefore, the sender must have the expertise or find someone with the topical expertise to communicate the message.

There are times when we believe we must be the expert in everything. This is an unrealistic goal. For effective communication to happen, one must communicate both what she/he knows and what one does not know. Remember the goal of communication is for the receiver to accept an accurate message from the sender. This does not mean the receiver will agree with the message, rather that the receiver accurately understands the message.

The receiver accepts a message through attention and comprehension. Attention is tuning in to the message being sent, and comprehension involves understanding the message and accepting or rejecting it. Accepting a message involves both a cognitive acceptance of the message and an affective acceptance of the message.

The value in thinking about communication through a model such as the SCRM model is to demonstrate that effective communication is a complex process, rather than just listening and speaking. Therefore, each of us should think about the effectiveness of our current communication patterns—whether as the sender or the receiver.

## How might I improve my ability to listen?

### Listening vs. Speaking

Many of us were required to take a speech communications course while in college. However, probably none of us had to take a listening course. Some of us are comfortable with the concept of speaking in a way that positively impacts communication. Far fewer of us are comfortable, or even think about, our listening skill set. Listening is equally, if not more, important than speaking, for effective communication to occur.

### Effective Listening

Effective listening involves using the following skill set:

- Active listening
- Perspective taking
- Understanding the message
- Maintaining neutrality
- Understanding positions vs. interests, and
- Managing one's emotions.

Through effective listening, the receiver can grasp the context of the message being sent by the sender. These effective communicating terms are defined below.

**Active Listening** A communication procedure wherein the listener uses nonverbal behavior, such as eye contact and gestures, as well as verbal behavior, including tone of voice, open-ended questions, restatements, and summaries, to demonstrate to the speaker that he or she is being heard.

- **Summarize** To restate in a concise form. Summarizing is an aspect of active listening utilized by all parties in dialogue to increase a common understanding.
- **Clarify** To make clearer or enhance understanding. Clarifying involves asking questions, restating, and summarizing what the speaker said.

**Perception** One's viewpoint or understanding of a situation. From perception, comes **perspective taking**—being able to understand (not necessarily agree with) another's point of view.

**Understanding the Message** Since we think four to five times faster than people talk, we can invest the additional capacity while listening to interpret what we hear and look for the underlying meaning.

**Maintaining Neutrality** Neutrality implies not favoring or being biased to either side. Listening neutrally, i.e., listening without judgment, is a valuable skill.

**Understanding Positions** A position, a point of view or a specific solution that a party proposes to meet his/her interests or needs, is likely to be concrete and explicit, often involving a demand or threat, and leaving little room for discussion. An essential activity is for people to move beyond positions in order to understand one another's underlying interests and needs.

- **Interest/Need** A substantive, procedural, or psychological need of a party in a conflict situation, the aspect of something that makes the dialogue significant.

**Managing Emotions** Stay aware of your emotions, biases, and prejudices and realize their impact on the communication process. This skill set is necessary, so our emotions can enhance the communication process vs. "getting in the way of effective communication."

## Active Listening Exercise

This exercise gives students practice actively listening to others, a skill that incorporates both listening and giving feedback.

Guide for this exercise

1. One team member is the speaker, and the other members are the listeners.
2. The speaker takes a minute or so to express an idea, opinion, thought, or feeling about what the team is working on at the time.
3. The speaker then calls on one of the listeners to paraphrase what was expressed.
4. The speaker then gives feedback to the listener regarding the accuracy of the response.
5. The listener must then hone the response until the speaker is satisfied with the accuracy of the response.
6. Once the speaker is satisfied, the listener can follow up by asking, "Is there anything else about that?", thus continuing the process.
7. Once this is completed, the roles can be changed and the process repeated.

## Ladder of Inquiry

One of the advanced tools that can help people practice the discipline of listening more actively and effectively is the ladder of inference. The ladder of inference can help listeners break their jumps from observable data to choices of action into different rungs on a ladder. The first rung is observable data. On the second rung, people select the data they will use and ignore the rest. Then, third, people use their personal and cultural beliefs to construct meaning for the data. Fourth, they make assumptions using the added meaning. Fifth, they draw conclusions from the assumptions and selected data. Sixth, they use the conclusions to adopt personal beliefs to use in the future. Finally, they select an action based on their beliefs. The ladder of inference and a simple example of observing a student who was thirty minutes late to a team meeting are shown below.<sup>7</sup> Faculty members might use the ladder of inference to help team members make their chains of reasoning explicit to themselves and share these with others on their teams.

Take action based on personal beliefs	John doesn't make a good team member
Adopt personal beliefs to be used in the future	John always comes in late
Draw conclusions	John knew when the team meeting started and was deliberately late
Make assumptions using the added meaning	John was late for the team meeting by 30 minutes
Use personal and cultural beliefs to add meaning	
Select the data	
Observable data	

## How and why might I balance inquiry and advocacy?

**Inquiry** is a method of acquiring information, data, and ideas from another person. **Advocacy** is speaking in favor of or defending. All too often people on teams will practice advocacy, working to convince others on their team to share their points of view. Referring back to our model, when the sender is not thoughtful of the context (adapting your presentation to the audience), then the message can be lost in “trying to convince others of your viewpoint.”

Inquiry is a far more effective strategy for teams, particularly in the early stages of a project or assignment. With inquiry, team members are focusing on the content and ideas that the sender is sharing rather than working to determine if the sender is right or wrong or if the sender has a good idea or a bad idea. Inquiry allows a group to solve problems creatively and provides the forum for developing collaborative ideas.

**Inquiry Example** When a team member presents a conclusion, other team members might ask “What leads you to conclude that?” “What data have you used to arrive at your conclusion?” “What causes you to say that?” [Protocols for balancing advocacy and inquiry<sup>7</sup>]

Advocacy can be beneficial later in the communication process when the team is ready to determine the best method of intervention for their assigned goal. Initially, utilizing inquiry is useful for individuals on a team. When using inquiry, the receiver can use his/her energy for attention and comprehension instead of for defense.

**Advocacy Example** When making a proposal, provide examples of your idea, even if these are hypothetical or metaphorical. For example, “To get a clearer picture of what I’m talking about, imagine that you’re the person who will be using our design.” [Protocols for balancing advocacy and inquiry<sup>7</sup>]

**Team Activity** Ask each team to review other protocols for balancing advocacy and inquiry on pages 255–259 of *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.<sup>7</sup> Ask each team to describe one protocol that might be useful in their team meetings.

## How might I offer constructive feedback and constructive criticism?

Feedback is critical for everyone. However, many interpret feedback as negative criticism. Reviewing the SMCR model shows that, when we receive information from others, we often think/worry/wonder whether the sender giving us feedback is judging us or our ideas. When we work in teams, discussing issues of feedback and criticism and of how team members might focus on providing feedback and avoiding criticism is important.

Feedback is returning output of information based upon input received by another. On the one hand, constructive feedback can be provided to others on our team when we (the receiver) have listened to the information being presented and accurately received the message from the sender. On the other hand, criticism is the act of making judgments or evaluations. Most people do not differentiate between constructive and destructive criticism, but there is a big difference. With destructive criticism, the sender is often attempting to undermine the person or the idea in order to receive personal gain (e.g., even if people will not accept my idea, they will not be accepting his/her idea, either).

Providing feedback to a team member who has presented an idea can be a valuable exercise. However, the sender, who receives the feedback, must listen to the feedback being presented rather than wonder whether the sender is judging the person or the idea.

Constructive criticism criticizes the proposed idea. It is not a judgment of the total idea or of the person but feedback on what the receiver sees as weaknesses of the idea. The person providing the constructive criticism is doing so in order to create the best product or come up with the best plan and is actually supporting the sender in wanting to make the sender’s idea even better. Although we cannot know a person’s intent, a person providing constructive criticism is viewed as someone who is supportive of the team process and of each member of the team.

## Receiving and Giving Feedback

When communicating, you must learn to be effective, both in the way you receive feedback from others and the way you tell others what you think of their ideas. Here are some tips for effective ways of receiving and giving feedback.

### Receiving Feedback from Others

Few people are eager to have others disagree with them, and even fewer people want to discuss issues with someone who is angry or hostile. Nonetheless, part of effective communication is being able to productively engage in conflict and to be able to give and receive *constructive criticism*.

Here are four things you can do when someone disagrees with you, your opinion, or a proposed solution.

- Evaluate if you are taking the constructive criticism personally. Many times, when a person is “criticizing our ideas,” we decide that the person is “criticizing our personhood” (Ruiz). Practice not taking criticism personally.
- Get yourself in a continuous improvement mood; that is, this feedback is information that can help you become better—better at the substance of the issue or better at interpersonal skills.
- Find something that you can agree with and express that agreement.
- Do not assume that you know what the other person thinks or feels (e.g., he/she is criticizing me and thinks I am not smart). Ruiz states, “Do not take statements personally.” Most people are not trying to attack us.

### Giving Feedback to Team Members

Start with something supportive. Point out where you agree with him/her. Do not fake it, but you can always find something positive about another person, particularly if you are not judging.

State your opinion using “I” statements. “I” statements are always carefully phrased so that you are acknowledging your point of view with no hint of negativity toward the opinion of the recipient. An example of an “I” statement is, “When you interrupt (specific behavior), I feel you do not value my input to the group (expression of your thoughts or feelings), and I would like for you to not interrupt me when I am talking (behavior-change request).” A person is less defensive when you use a specific example and identify your thoughts and feelings (vs. saying, “You made me...”). Remember that you are making a behavior-change request of the person—you cannot make the other person change her/his behavior.

Monitor your tone of voice and body language. Sarcasm can be conveyed totally by tone of voice, and we are often unaware of our tone of voice unless we pay attention to it. Also, monitor body language and increase your awareness of the messages that your body language might convey.

You can tell if you are following these suggestions effectively by watching the observer. If they get (or continue to be) hot under the collar, you have not succeeded. Understand, of course, that sometimes the recipient may be angry, no matter what you do, but, if you try these techniques, odds are the other person will listen to you. For many people, giving and receiving constructive criticism is difficult. Asking a teammate to facilitate may help.

### **How might individual students apply this information to improve their interpersonal communication skills?**

So what might I do with this communication information? Individual reflection on your listening, inquiry and advocacy, and constructive feedback skills is a good place to start. Informally you can assess your communication strengths and deficits just by asking yourself, "What communication strategies have I used that have been most effective when I am interfacing with people, either personally or professionally?" With self-evaluation most of us can accurately identify what communication skills are our strengths and which ones we need to improve.

Beyond individual reflection there are many assessments available with which you can informally assess your communication strengths and weaknesses. The TTI DISC Behavior Profile<sup>9</sup> allows you to see how your communication styles positively impact how you work with others and areas where you might get yourself in trouble while communicating with others.

When we recognize our communication weaknesses, we should take steps to improve these communication areas, whether through formal or informal methods. Discussing with our team how we communicate and our preferred methods of being communicated to is important. Proactive communication can reduce a great number of team conflicts down the road. The following examples provide additional suggestions that individuals might use to improve their communication skills.

- Practice, practice, practice—most people take communication for granted. Effective communication takes a conscious effort at continual enhancement and refinement. Get your team members to help you identify your strengths and deficits in communicating.
- Take a formal assessment, such as the TTI DISC Behavior Profile, to evaluate your behaviors and communication within a professional setting.
- Determine if you want to make changes in your communication style. You may wish to speak with your professor about opportunities available to you through your department, college, or university.

### **How might a student team apply this information to improve its approaches to conflict and/or skills in managing conflict within the team?**

- Establish a protocol for team communication. See Nancy Kline's book<sup>9</sup> for suggestions.
- Discuss each team member's communication strengths and weaknesses and how each of these can impact the team.
- Practice good communication skills as a team activity. Practice activities include using active listening and giving and receiving constructive criticism.

### **How might a faculty member apply this information in her/his course?**

Your learning objectives and activities will depend on the maturity of your students, their prior experience and knowledge of interpersonal/intrateam communication skills, and the amount of class time you choose to invest in communications. The following paragraphs provide several examples of possible learning objectives and classroom activities.

#### **Example No. 1 (Time required: 15–20 minutes)**

If you are teaching teaming skills and have 15–20 minutes for team communication, here is what you might do:

**Learning Objective** Students should be able to identify their strengths in communication (good listener, good speaker).

**Classroom Activity** Discuss pages 1–3 of this document. Review with the students what communication is and why it is important for a team.

Team members might identify and share with one another their communication styles (page 2, Sender's culture section). Team members should identify how they positively impact their team with their communication styles and identify where areas of conflict might arise between team members because of different communication styles. Remember to point out that there is no wrong communication style, but team members must be aware of differences in communication styles among team members in order to increase understanding and decrease making wrong assumptions, thus creating more conflict.

#### **Example No. 2 (Time required: 30 minutes)**

If you are teaching teaming skills and have a half a class or so for team communication, here is what you could do:

**Learning Objective** Students should be able to identify their beliefs and assumptions that impact the team.

**Classroom Activity** Discuss pages 1 and 3 (Ladder of Inquiry and How might I improve my ability to listen? sections) of this document, and have students tell their teammates what assumptions they make based upon people's behaviors (e.g., if you do not talk, I think you do not care about the assignment, when really you might be a quiet person, and you are waiting patiently to be asked to speak).

Students should review the Effective Listening techniques (p. 3) and tell team members what techniques they are going to use more to help in the reduction of making assumptions (e.g., I am going to summarize what I have understood you to have said in order to reduce my making assumptions). Teammates might put in writing what effective listening techniques they are going to practice with their team and revisit the issue four weeks after this assignment (will take ~10 minutes of additional class time).

#### **Example No. 3 (Time required: 1 hour)**

If you are teaching teaming communication skills and you have an entire class for team communication, here is what you could do:

**Learning Objective** Students should be able to identify and communicate their team communication strengths and deficits to team members.

**Classroom Activity** Discuss pages 1 and 4 of this document. Acquire and ask students to take the DISC Behavior Profile Assessment and review their reports (see TTI DISC Behavior Profile information in the reference section).

Students will share the following sections of their reports with teammates: effective communication with me, perceptions, and natural and adapted behavior styles. Students will write down the ideal environment for communicating with each of their teammates and identify where barriers for conflict may be. Furthermore, have students identify how they believe they have had to adapt their behavior (DISC Behavior Profile, Success Insight Wheel) to be successful in their coursework and to be successful with their current team. Team members may report their findings in a brief paper to their professor.

**Example No. 4 (Time required: 15–20 minutes)**

If you are teaching a class in which you will be using student teams and choose to invest twenty minutes of class time to help students develop their communication skills, then you might select the following learning objectives and use the following classroom activities:

**Learning Objective** Students should be able to understand and practice neutrality when providing constructive criticism to a teammate.

**Classroom Activity** The activity focuses on the following statement “**Neutrality** is not making **suggestions** or **judgments**.”

(Exercise reprinted with permission.<sup>10</sup>)

When communicating with someone, our goal is to share our ideas, not to put the person on the defensive. If we suggest, judge, or give our opinions, others may feel that we are not neutral, and they will not trust us.

Read the following **non-neutral** statements. Decide whether they are S (suggestions) or J (judgments). Then, rewrite the statements so that they are **neutral**.

- \_\_\_ 1. It sounds like you were not playing by the rules.
- \_\_\_ 2. Why did you do that? That was a foolish thing to do.
- \_\_\_ 3. The best way for you to handle this is to ask your supervisor to move offices.
- \_\_\_ 4. It seems that one of you is lying.
- \_\_\_ 5. Do you think that you could pay Myosha for the computer?

Examples of Neutral Phrases

- Can you tell us about the situation?
- Can you tell us what happened?
- How are you feeling about that?
- How are you feeling about (e.g., him having to dominate staff meetings)?
- Can you tell us more about that?
- Would you tell us more about how (name) got the computer?
- Can you explain more about (issue)?
- Can you give some examples of how you think (name) is always messing with you?
- What happened when (event)?
- What was it like before?
- Has this problem happened before?
- I feel confused when I hear two different stories. Can we clarify again what happened?
- What would you like to see changed?
- So, in other words, when (name) says (what), you feel \_\_\_\_. Is that right?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us?
- How could you have handled it differently?
- Can you suggest a solution that will resolve the problem of \_\_\_\_?

**Example No. 5 Time required: 30 minutes)**

If you are teaching a class in which you will be using student teams and choose to invest a homework assignment in helping your students develop their communication skills, then you might select the following learning objectives and use the following classroom activities:

**Learning Objective** Students will be aware and practice active listening techniques in order to more effectively communicate with team members.

**Classroom Activity** Ask students to review page 3 of this document prior to coming to class. Have students participate in the Active Listening exercise on page 3 of this paper. Review the techniques for active listening listed below. Finally, have students practice the four active listening techniques in the exercise below. (Exercise reprinted with permission.<sup>10</sup>)

**Techniques for Active Listening**

**Encouraging** Encourage the other person to keep talking. Show that you are interested in what they are saying. **Example:** “Can you tell us more?”

**Questioning** Ask questions to get more information or to better understand the problem. **Examples:** “Where did this happen?” “How long have you known each other?”

**Restating** Restate in your own words the basic ideas, i.e., facts and feelings. **Example:** “So you were in the parking lot, and he tripped you, and you’re angry.”

**Summarizing** Summarize the important ideas and feelings as each person said them. Identify the things they have in common. **Example:** “This seems to be what happened, and you’re feeling \_\_\_\_ (or you’re both feeling \_\_\_\_). Is that right?”

**Practice Exercises for Active Listening**

Each of the following examples presents something that might be said to be an active listener. After the quote, write down possible questions or statements that you might say as the active listener.

**Encouraging**

Teammate: “She’s always taking things of mine without asking permission. I don’t know. I’m just angry at her because taking my report was the last straw.”

What might you say to encourage this person to keep talking?

**Questioning**

Teammate: “My professor is always blaming me for everything. It doesn’t matter whether I talk in a meeting or not. She thinks I’m the one who does it.”

What questions might you ask to get more information or to understand the problem better?

**Restating**

Teammate: “Sometimes Dr. Imbrie talks very fast, and I have a hard time understanding what he says, but I’m afraid to ask him to repeat. I’m afraid he will get mad at me.”

How might you restate these ideas and feelings?

**Summarizing**

Teammate: “She was spreading rumors about me that I was talking with the other teammate and trying to influence his opinion. But that’s not true at all. It was the other teammate who came up to me in the dining hall and started talking. She’s making a big thing out of nothing.”

What important ideas and feelings can you summarize from what was said?

### Example No. 6 (Time required: 1 hour)

If you are teaching a class in which you will be using student teams and choose to invest a homework assignment and an entire class period in helping your students develop their communication skills, then you might select the following learning objectives and use the following classroom activities:

**Learning Objective** Students will be able to discuss interpersonal and intrateam communication and be aware of strengths and pitfalls in communicating with teammates.

**Classroom Activity** Ask students to read this entire document as a homework assignment. Present a mini-lecture to students that, although they have additional information about effective communication, many times we do not feel comfortable providing criticism or asking a person to elaborate more when talking with them. Share with students the information below about **reacting assertively**.

### Reacting Assertively

What does it mean to be aggressive, passive, or assertive? People are aggressive when they

- Intentionally attack, harm, hurt, put down, or work to take advantage of others
- Believe they are more important than others
- Believe “get them before they get you.”

People are passive when they

- Permit or let others take advantage of them
- Act as if others are more important than they are
- Believe “I should never make anyone feel uncomfortable or displeased except myself.”

People are assertive when they

- Express themselves openly and honestly to communicate their needs, wants, feelings, or desires
- Respect the thoughts and feelings of others
- Believe that all people are equal and act accordingly
- Believe “I have a right to ask for what I want.”

Many people think there are only two options when communicating with others: either be aggressive or be passive. There is a third alternative to engaging in communication, particularly when there is conflict, and that is reacting assertively. Assertiveness is valuable because it allows all people talking the opportunity to be respected and to hear what each one is saying.

Team Interaction: Ask team members to share with each other how they typically communicate: aggressively, passively, or assertively.

(Exercise reprinted with permission.<sup>10</sup>)

### References for Further Information

1. Katzenbach, J.R., and Smith, D.K. (1992) *Wisdom of Teams*, Harvard Business School Press.
2. Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., and Holubec, E.J. (1966) *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*, rev. edition, Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company, 1986.
3. Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want, American Society for Training and Development and U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 1988.
4. Algert, N.E., and Watson, K. (2002). *An Introduction to Conflict Management for Individuals and Groups*. The Center for Change and Conflict Resolution. Bryan, TX.
5. Communications: Process and Leadership, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://socserver.soc.iastate.edu/Extension/Docs/Soc2.pdf>>. [cited 2003-02-03]
6. Ruiz, D.M. (1997) *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, San Rafael, CA: Amber-Allen Pub
7. Senge, P.M., Kleiner, A., Roberts, C., Ross, R., and Smith, B. (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*, New York: Doubleday/Currency
8. TTI DISC Behavior Profile. Contact Dr. Nancy Algert (phone: 979-775-5335 or e-mail: [cccr@bigfoot.com](mailto:cccr@bigfoot.com)) for information about obtaining the assessment. Texas A&M University's College of Engineering uses the DISC Behavior Profile Assessment with all of their Engineering 111/112 students for teaming activities (contact Dr. Terry Kohutek, [t-kohutek@tamu.edu](mailto:t-kohutek@tamu.edu), for additional information on using the assessment).
9. Kline, N. (1999). *Time to think: Listening to ignite the human mind*. London: Ward Lock.
10. Algert, N.E., and Watson, K. (2002). Basic Mediation Training. The Center for Change and Conflict Resolution. Bryan, TX.

### Additional Resource

Algert, N.E. *The Center for Change and Conflict Resolution*. Bryan, TX: (979)775-5335 or [cccr@bigfoot.com](mailto:cccr@bigfoot.com).

Whether you're just getting started or looking for some additional ideas, the Foundation Coalition staff would like to help you incorporate student teams into your engineering classes through workshops, Web sites, lesson plans, and reading materials. For suggestions on how to start, see our Web site at

<http://www.foundationcoalition.org> or contact Jeffrey Froyd at [froyd@ee.tamu.edu](mailto:froyd@ee.tamu.edu) or at 979-845-7574.

