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## UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE: COMMUNICATION, EMPATHY, CONTEXT, AND CULTURE

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1.1 Describe how people communicate in the 21st century.
- 1.2 Explore how people understand, engage with, and process information.
- 1.3 Discuss the role of empathy and inclusion in the workplace.
- 1.4 Examine the role of communication in workplace culture.

## THEIR STORY, KAT COLE

*Even at 18 years old, Katrina (Kat) Cole recognized the value in working with and understanding people. Not one to shy away from volunteering to help others at work, as a young restaurant hostess, she would frequently pick up extra shifts, volunteer to cook or bartend, and generally learn the roles that others often performed.*

*Her energy and connection with coworkers was quickly noticed. Her manager named her the franchise's best employee, and by age 19, she was invited to train and motivate new franchise owners and employees at restaurants in Australia. Soon after, she was doing the same thing in Mexico and South America.*

*By age 26, Cole had climbed all the way to vice president of the company. Later, she would become the president of another major food chain, Cinnabon and, not long after, the chief operating officer and president of Focus Brands—the parent company of Cinnabon and other popular international chains including Jamba Juice, Moe's Southwest Grill, and Auntie Anne's Pretzels. After 12 years at Focus Brands, Cole would move into another impressive role: president, chief operating officer, and board of directors for Athletic Greens, a nutritional supplement company.*

*When interviewed by Forbes magazine in 2020, Cole provided insight into her tremendous success. Asked about how she revitalized the Cinnabon brand—which had been struggling in 2010 after the Great Recession—she said, "I knew I needed to be in the locations. I rolled cinnamon rolls. I took out the trash. And I'm not talking shaking hands and kissing babies. I was there for hours, learning, listening, watching, asking questions."<sup>1</sup>*

*Many leaders today share similar stories: their success was built by empathizing with, listening to, and being around their employees. Kat Cole built a reputation for understanding people. In this chapter, we explore how communication, empathy, and the ability to understand people will, as it did for Kat Cole, position you for greater success in the workplace.*

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is powerful—but connecting with people is essential. So let's start there, with a profoundly simple idea: if you can learn to empathize and communicate well with the people you're surrounded by at work, you will be far more influential, effective, and successful in your career.

Think about how you currently spend your days—at school, with friends, at home, or in the community. How much of your life is spent communicating: sharing ideas, telling stories, asking questions, providing insight or perspective, listening to others, or even negotiating? More than

likely, communicating is a constant part of your daily life. Chances are, it won't be much different at work.

Many of us think of our careers in terms of our title or field—engineer, accountant, microbiologist, technical writer, designer, educator, and so forth. We don't often think of ourselves as professional communicators and relationship builders, even if research suggests we should. Numerous studies have shown that roughly 80% of our workdays are spent communicating and establishing professional relationships with coworkers and customers.

Considering you'll likely spend one-third of your adult life—more than 90,000 hours—on the job, it's probably a good time to be thinking about how you'll not only become an expert in your field but a master communicator.

If you think about it, regardless of your job, you will almost constantly be engaging with people in some way: listening, informing, writing, teaching, training, designing, and presenting. You'll be pitching ideas, sharing resources, and encouraging people to get on board. You'll negotiate, lead, persuade, and collaborate.

The more you improve in each of these areas, the better your experience at work is likely to be.

Communicating well is often easier said than done. Nancy Duarte, CEO and public speaking expert, has said, “[Great communication] isn't something that just happens automatically; it comes at the price of long and thoughtful hours spent constructing messages that resonate deeply and elicit empathy.”<sup>2</sup> Communication mastery takes know-how, practice, and an acute awareness of language, culture, technology, and design. It requires you to understand how people think, read, feel, see, and respond to information.

Plus, in a rapidly changing world, mastering effective communication will require you to adapt to a variety of circumstances and audiences. As your company, industry, and society change, so will the way you need to communicate. If it sounds like there's a lot to learn, you're right. But don't worry—it's actually an exciting time to be communicating in the workplace. So let's jump right in!

## THE WORLD IS CHANGING—SO SHOULD THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE

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If you look around, you'll probably notice several ways we communicate differently now than we did 20 years ago. Yes, some things have stayed the same—we're all still human, after all—but much has changed with our technology, culture, and messaging, and it's important to understand how that will affect the way you interact with people throughout your career.

As a business professional, you will need to learn to do more than write, speak, and design well. You'll need to understand how people generally—and your coworkers specifically—are evolving, so you can be more responsive to their needs. You'll need to learn to exercise empathy, complex ethical decision-making, and thoughtful **information design** (strategic methods for visually formatting messages) to truly connect with people at work.

To consider how the evolution of people in workplace environments will affect your career, let's take a quick look into how some of the changes in workplace culture, emergence of new technologies, and expectations for strong design have evolved in recent years.

### Changes in Business Culture

For starters, **workplace culture** (the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors that shape what people experience in work environments) and business practices are much different today than they

were even a few short decades ago. We live in an increasingly globalized society. In fact, **globalization** (the integration of and reliance on people, cultures, companies, and services from around the world) is becoming commonplace. At work today, we interact with more people who live in or are from regions far away from our native birthplaces.

Consider a few interesting facts about our globalized workplaces:

- More than 7 million Americans work for foreign companies.<sup>3</sup>
- Globally, approximately 80 million people work for foreign-owned businesses.<sup>4</sup>
- Large U.S.-based companies like Kellogg Co. and Fresh Del Monte have workforces where 60–80% of employees live overseas.<sup>5</sup>
- Global interest in increasing representation of marginalized groups on executive teams is steadily increasing, from 7% in 2014 to 13% in 2019. Companies in the top quartile for ethnic and cultural diversity are 36% more profitable than those that are not.<sup>6</sup>

By the time you read this book, those statistics will have changed, but there is a clear trend: businesses are becoming more **multinational**, meaning they include employees from multiple nations and have operations in more than one country. Businesses today are culturally diverse, and they will only continue to become more so in the future.

What does that mean for you? Chances are high you will work for businesses that employ people from many different parts of the world, and you will work with and for people whose culture, ethnicity, religion, background, and life experience are different from yours. You'll need to be conscious of and work through language and cultural differences, and you'll need to be empathetic as you share in those differences together. (We will discuss empathy more thoroughly later in the chapter.) Even if you work for a small business that has a culturally **homogeneous** workforce (where everyone is similar), you will often provide services to people of diverse ethnicities, and you will likely sell products through global ecommerce platforms.

Still, although globalization and workplace **diversity** (the inclusion of people from a range of socio-cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation and other backgrounds) play

important roles in corporate culture, they are only part of how career environments are evolving. Consider changes in our cultural expectations of formality, for example. In an article by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), author Bryan Lufkin proposed a fascinating question: “Is the formal ‘suited and booted’ office dress code extinct?” In the article, he noted that even highly formal industries like finance were adjusting their dress codes. Goldman Sachs, a multinational investment bank, told their IT employees in 2017 that they could relax their dress due to the “changing nature of workplaces.” By 2019, they made that same policy companywide.<sup>7</sup> Trends will continue to change, but the key is that you're able to adapt to the expectations within your company, industry, and society.



**Business Dress Styles Vary by Industry, Company, and Position.** The photo shows employees in a business whose culture is more formal in dress code with employees wearing suits and dresses.

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The way we write and speak is also changing. It wasn't that long ago that emoticons and **emojis** (digital, cartoon-like icons meant to express emotions or represent ideas) were considered too informal, unprofessional, and childish to be used in workplace communications. In fact, in as late as 2017, a study in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* suggested that “smileys . . . actually decrease perceptions of competence.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, within 2 years a 2019 *Forbes* article solidified what we were already beginning to know: perceptions are changing as 61% of employees regularly use emojis at work.<sup>9</sup> Will emojis become more normalized—and even expected—within this decade? Will companies and employees follow new research that says emojis bridge cultural divides and better capture emotion in the workplace?

This question raises an interesting generational change we're seeing in workplace environments. Whereas baby boomers or Generation X may view emojis and other similar forms of communication as inappropriate, Millennials and Generation Z tend to be much more comfortable with their use, even at work. As perceptions by generations change, so too does the evolution of business culture.

These are a few examples of the changes in business culture today. As time marches forward, workplace cultures will undoubtedly continue to evolve, and we have to prepare for those changes in the way we communicate.

### Changes in Technology

It probably goes without saying that the technologies people use to communicate—and the ways they use them—are also changing. In fact, you could probably rattle off four or five technologies you use today that you didn't 5 years ago.

Although communication in much of the 20th and early 21st centuries relied heavily on face-to-face interaction, phone calls, and emails, the 2020s are an age of constantly changing media, whether in social media platforms or with internal business communication and project management tools. What's remarkable isn't so much that we have different technology today than we did 30 years ago. That's to be expected. What's surprising is the rate at which organizations are being exposed to and adopting new tools—often while leaving old ones behind.

In 2021 in the health care industry alone, for example, there were more than 97,000 mHealth apps (mobile apps that support consumer connectivity with health care providers) available.<sup>10</sup> Not all of these apps became popular or were widely used, obviously, but what is clear is that the tools we often assume will be the standard rapidly change as technology improves. Likewise, the way people use the tools to communicate with each other also changes.

Consider the evolution of social media use since the turn of the century. MySpace—launched in 2003 and known for being the first broadly adopted social media platform—became the most visited website on Earth by 2006. Yet, within fewer than 3 years, Facebook assumed the top spot in 2009.<sup>11</sup> By 2011, MySpace was largely defunct. In a similar evolution in technology, Alphabet, the multimedia conglomerate and parent company of Google, launched Google+ in 2008. But although it claimed greater than 500 million users within 5 years, it was discontinued 5 years



**Business Dress Styles Vary by Industry, Company, and Position.** The photo shows employees in a more relaxed business culture wearing less formal attire, jeans, blouses, and polo shirts.

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later in 2018 due to “low usage and engagement.”<sup>12</sup> TikTok, which launched publicly in 2017, went from total obscurity to the third-most used social media platform by 2022.<sup>13</sup> As one tool rises, another falls. By the time you’re reading this book, new trends will likely have emerged.

We have seen similar rapid changes, rises, and falls in videoconferencing platforms as well. Whereas Skype largely dominated the videoconference scene in the early 2010s, the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 brought Zoom Communications to the forefront along with many other emerging platforms like Google Hangouts, MS Teams, and Cisco’s WebEx. By 2023, Zoom was the number one videoconferencing platform, holding greater than 40% of the market share.<sup>14</sup> Although some platforms will last longer than others, it’s important to prepare yourself for constant change.

As you think about how rapidly these changes in technologies occur, ponder a few interesting facts about how this has also changed the way we interact with people. At work, we’re now on videoconferencing platforms more than we are on phones. We chat with coworkers in real time through project management apps and co-authoring tools. With the use of workplace smartphones, supervisors send text and video messages to their employees in real time. Sometimes messages are even sent through personal phones and during nonwork hours, confusing traditionally accepted lines between work life and personal life. Our customers complain to us live on the internet for the world to see, and video résumés are no longer an abstract thing of the future. None of this could be said in 2010. The ways we connect with our peers, bosses, customers, and hiring managers has changed dramatically. Going forward, it will likely continue to change at an even faster pace.

In decades past, employees could safely learn a communication tool and feel comfortable that it wouldn’t drastically change in the near future. However, going forward one thing seems certain: the technologies we use to communicate with today are far less likely to stay the same—even in the near future—than they are to change. If we don’t adapt to the way people are communicating, we’ll become less effective at reaching them.

So what does that mean for you? The tools you use to communicate will never matter as much as the people you are communicating with. And, if tools and the people who use them change, you’ll need to as well.







### Changes in Design

Then there’s design.

In a heavily visual world, we create messages today in ways not dreamed of a short time ago. With the proliferation and access to desktop publishing and design software, people have begun to *expect*, not only prefer, content to look nice. Have you noticed how professional reports are starting to look more like magazine articles? Or how slide decks are starting to look like polished advertisements aimed to meet visual brand identity standards? Or, have you thought about how people often won’t read or pay attention to web content unless it employs good use of document design and usability principles—formatted and organized to grab their attention and make reading simpler and more enjoyable?

The reality is that we live in a time when information must be designed thoughtfully and strategically to be more accessible (**accessibility** refers to making content available and easy to understand by as many people as possible, regardless of ability), easy to read, simplified, and helpful. In an age of information overload, businesses and employees have to look for ways to encourage people to engage with their content. Consider some of these mind-blowing numbers about how much information we’re regularly exposed to and how that might affect the way we need to communicate (see Figure 1.1):

**FIGURE 1.1** ■ We're exposed to enormous amounts of information.

 <b>44,165</b>	<p>The average number of emails received by an office employee per year (about 120 per day, including weekends).<sup>i</sup></p>
 <b>34 GB</b>	<p>A low estimate of the quantity of data, in gigabytes, that our brains are likely exposed to each day (enough to fill a fairly powerful computer).<sup>ii</sup></p>
 <b>10–20</b>	<p>The number of tabs a person typically has open in a browser while working on the internet—and that doesn't even include other apps!</p>
 <b>4K–10K</b>	<p>Estimated number of brand images we are exposed to every day.<sup>iii</sup></p>
 <b>8 Seconds</b>	<p>About how long Microsoft says the average person's attention span lasts. That's down from 12 seconds in 2000.<sup>iv</sup></p>
 <b>96</b>	<p>The number of times the average person checks their phone per day—about every 10 minutes during waking hours.<sup>v</sup></p>

Sources: <sup>i</sup>The Radicati Group. (2018). *Email statistics report, 2018–2022*. <https://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Email-Statistics-Report-2018-2022-Executive-Summary.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Bohn, R., & Short, J. (2012). Measuring consumer information. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 980–1000.

<sup>iii</sup> Simpson, J. (2017). Finding brand success in the digital world. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/?sh=66294082626e>

<sup>iv</sup> McSpadden, K. (2015, May 14). You now have a shorter attention span than a goldfish. *Time*. <https://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/>

<sup>v</sup> Asurion. (2019, November 21). Americans check their phones 96 times a day. <https://www.asurion.com/about/press-releases/americans-check-their-phones-96-times-a-day/>

When you're communicating with people who are inundated with so much information, how can you possibly get their attention? How can you encourage them to read your email, review your report, or stay attuned to your presentation? One proven method is to improve the design of your information.

Today, your audiences are accustomed to and will likely expect you to possess some design acuity. Because people have been increasingly exposed to well-designed documents, apps, and websites for some time now, they are beginning to expect things to look good, feel right, and meet their needs. The opposite is also true: they're often not willing to commit much time or brainpower to anything that doesn't grab—and retain—their attention. In fact, poorly designed documents have been shown to reduce perceptions of credibility. As a part of a study conducted by Stanford University, researchers noted, “A broad range of design decisions . . . can powerfully influence whether visitors are likely to find a site credible.”<sup>15</sup> When content was poorly designed, people were less likely to find it trustworthy.

With so much information around us, people are more likely to ignore large bodies of written text. Interestingly, author and behavioral psychologist Susan Weinschenk has noted that people don't read anymore—at least not in sustained intervals for longer than 5 minutes. Accessing information in largely virtual environments, people usually skim, scan, and “**satisfice**” (make quick decisions with minimal information). They pay attention only to what they need, in that moment, and they'll look for headings, images, and other visual cues to get them what they need faster.<sup>16</sup>

So what does all this mean? You'll need to be far more adaptive to change than business professionals—and professional communicators!—have ever had to in the past. And you'll need to remember, above all else, that communication is about understanding people and how they access, respond to, and use communication today in a wide array of contexts.

As you look to the past to forecast the future, it's evident that communication tools and methods will continue to evolve. Although it's important to stay abreast of new tools and document types, your primary goal as a professional communicator should be to focus more on what people need, want, and expect.

## HOW HUMANS THINK AND WHY THIS MATTERS AT WORK

Emphasizing people's needs throughout the communication process is a central focus of this book. Despite rapid changes in culture, technology, and design, good communicators understand people and context first.

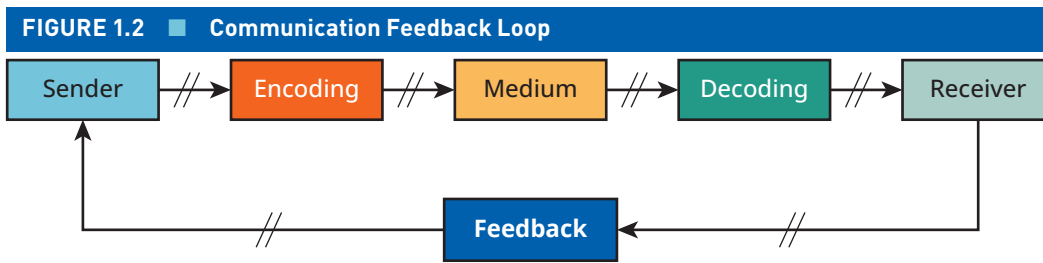
As you begin thinking about the ways you'll communicate during your career, you'll need to keep a **user-centered** mindset. That means recognizing, in any message that you deliver, how you can best meet a person's needs. User-centered thinking means you work to understand a person's problem or situation, then you carefully craft the message to best reach the individual. It means you generally understand how people think and process information but also how individuals of different ages, abilities, knowledge, backgrounds, or perspectives might access and think about the information in other ways.

To understand how people think and respond to information, you'll want to become familiar with three important concepts: the communication feedback loop; the workplace communication hierarchy of needs; and the triune brain (gut, head, and heart).

### The Communication Feedback Loop

Every time you speak to someone, there is some kind of a back-and-forth experience. Typically, if you say a sentence or phrase, the person you are speaking to will look at and acknowledge you, and they'll say something in return. You create a message, they receive it, and there is a response. This is what we call the **communication feedback loop**; you can see how it works in Figure 1.2 below.





Communication should always be thought of as an exchange between two sides: the **sender**, the individual or organization creating and distributing the message, and the **receiver(s)**, the person or people receiving the message. The sender will **encode** a message, meaning they will make choices about which words, visuals, sounds, tone, and so forth that are meant to relay an idea. They then send this message through a **medium**, or communication channel, like face-to-face, on a piece of paper, through an email, on a billboard, and so forth. Then, on the other side, the receiver **decodes** the message, or attempts to interpret the meaning of the words, visuals, sounds, and so on. The idea, in theory, is fairly simple: whenever you share a message with another person, you have an expectation for how it will be interpreted. You create the message; they attempt to understand it.

Things get a little tricky, though, when noise gets in the way. **Noise** is anything that might affect how a person interprets (decodes) the message. **Feedback**, or the way in which a person responds to the message—which might be a verbal or written response, a physical action, or even no response at all—lets you know whether or not the message was received the way you intended.

### Communication Breakdown

Consider an exchange between coworkers Deneiva and Ahmed. Deneiva is preparing for an office party that evening, while Ahmed has an hour to kill before meeting with a client in the afternoon. Deneiva, noticing that Ahmed is available, asks him if he could run to the store to pick up some party supplies.

“Sure,” Ahmed replies. “But can you make the list short? I don’t want to be late for my client meeting.”

Deneiva, in an effort to help Ahmed hurry, writes seven small items on a piece of paper and hands it to him as he races out the door.

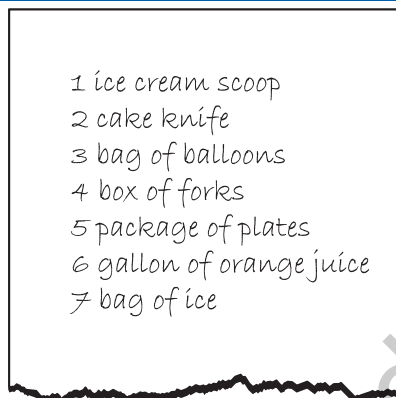
When Ahmed returns, Deneiva is confused. In a frenzied rush, Ahmed hands three bags to Deneiva, then bolts back out the door, saying he’ll be right back with another load. Deneiva, knowing she asked for only seven things, scratches her head. She looks in the first bag and finds an ice cream scoop, which is what she asked for. Then she looks in the second and third bags, where she sees two cake knives and three bags of balloons, respectively.

That’s weird, she thinks. I only needed one knife and one bag of balloons.

Ahmed then runs in with a fourth and fifth bag and darts back out for another load. Now Deneiva is even more confused. In the fourth bag, she finds four boxes of forks and in the fifth bag, five packages of plates. Again, she thinks, *What on earth? I needed only one of each of these!*

Then, she notices the list she gave to Ahmed in that fifth bag:

**FIGURE 1.3** ■ Grocery List Gone Wrong



As Deneiva is realizing what happened, Ahmed frantically runs in several more times, dropping off six gallons of orange juice and seven large bags of ice.

You can probably tell by looking at the shopping list (Figure 1.3) where the communication broke down. Deneiva numbered the list in an attempt to help Ahmed know she needed only seven things. But when Ahmed, who was in a hurry, didn't see periods next to each number, he assumed she meant quantity for each item and rushed to get what Deneiva needed.

Although the story is kind of silly, it illustrates how a feedback loop works. Deneiva (the *sender*) created a message, a shopping list. She *encoded* the message by writing the items she needed on a piece of paper—the *medium*—and added numbers (without periods) next to each item. Ahmed (the *receiver*) read the list and *decoded* it, or interpreted it based on its communication nuances. The feedback occurred when Ahmed showed up with far more than what Deneiva asked for. That's the moment when she realized the communication didn't work as intended—when *noise* got in the way. In Ahmed and Deneiva's case, Ahmed's life experience told him that numbers without periods meant quantity. Because he and Deneiva never chatted to confirm, he assumed one thing, whereas Deneiva meant another.

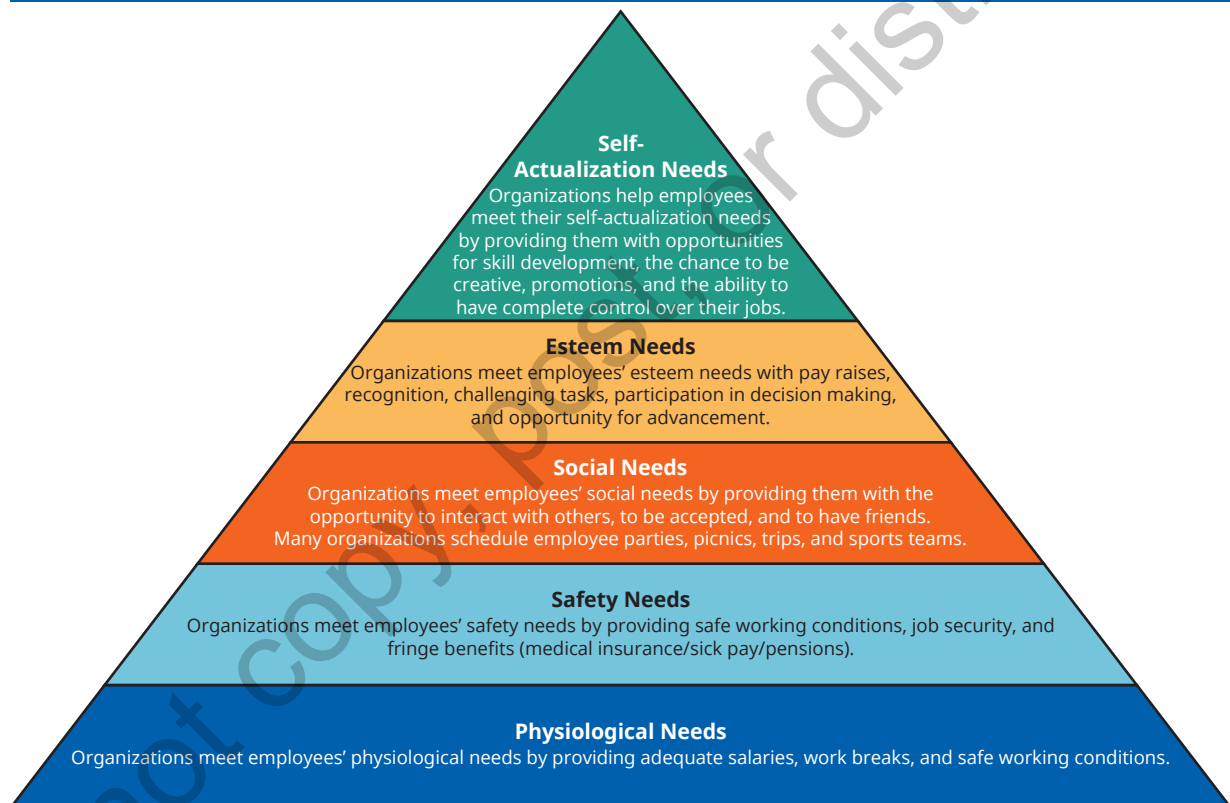
In other communications, *noise* might be actual, audible noise or anything else that interferes with how a message is interpreted—a language barrier, a cultural difference, a grammatical mistake, a lack of knowledge or experience, a generational gap, confusing terminology, something out of order, a misleading color, or any number of things.

When we create messages at work—especially messages that are more serious or important in nature—we have to be conscious of the communication loop. More importantly, we have to be responsive to the feedback. If our audience didn't understand what we meant, rather than blame them, we need to understand what noise got in the way and determine how to improve the message to make it clearer. Although Deneiva may be upset with Ahmed for not calling her to confirm if she actually needed seven bags of ice, she might also recognize that noise got in the way and she's partially at fault. Next time, she'll improve her communication, and hopefully they won't end up with too much leftover orange juice and melted ice!

## The Workplace Communication Hierarchy of Needs

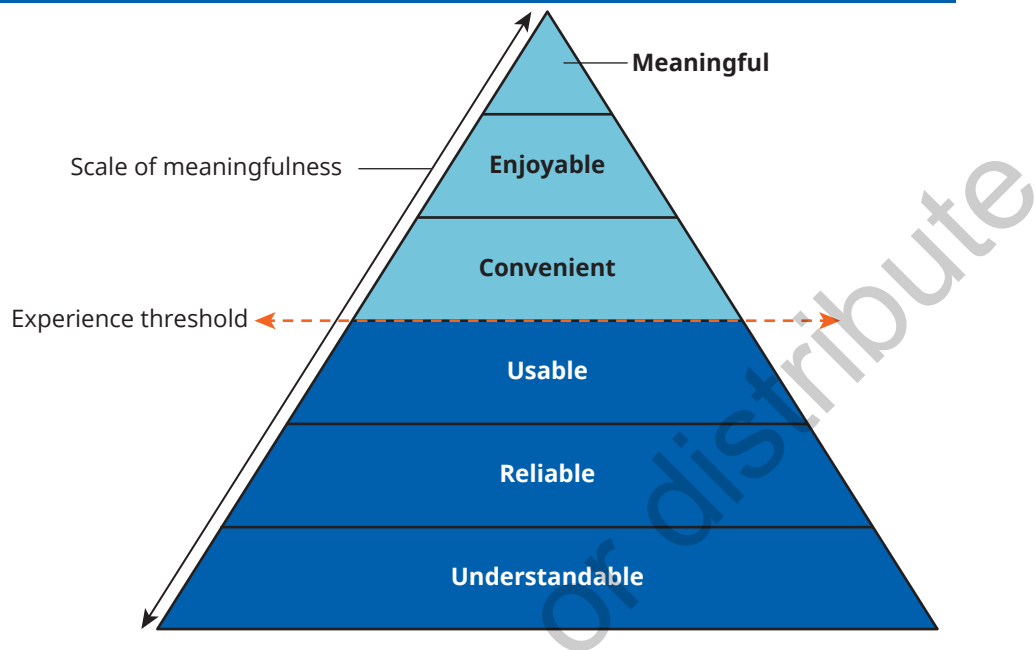
Making things clear and working to remove noise is only part of the workplace communication puzzle. As messages increase in importance, you'll need to think more thoroughly about your audience's needs. As we mentioned earlier, you'll do that by applying a user-centered mindset. To do this, start by re-thinking Abraham Maslow's famous **Hierarchy of Needs** (see Figure 1.4) at work in communication. Maslow identified increasingly important human needs, the most basic being physiological needs, like food and sleep, and the most advanced being transcendent needs, like spirituality. In between, he suggested, humans also have needs for safety, belonging, esteem, cognition, aesthetics, and self-actualization.<sup>17</sup>

**FIGURE 1.4** ■ Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



This concept of a hierarchy of needs has been adapted for many different fields, including artificial intelligence, marketing, web design, and even the treasury management.<sup>18,19,20,21</sup> The idea in these adaptations for different fields is that people have increasingly sophisticated needs; the goal is to get people to the pinnacle of the hierarchy. As with other fields, with communication it's helpful to think of the effectiveness of your messaging as a hierarchy.

User experience designer Stephen Anderson used six hierarchical terms to show a progression of importance for web design.<sup>22</sup> By using similar terms as Anderson, we can adapt the model to business communication as well (see Figure 1.5)

**FIGURE 1.5** ■ Business Communication Hierarchy of Needs

Source: Adapted from Anderson, S. P. (2011). *Seductive interaction design: Creating playful, fun, and effective user experiences*. New Riders.

- **Understandable:** At the most basic level, communications must be comprehensible. Text must be legible, grammar must be coherent, words and phrases must be understood, content must be in a language the audience speaks, and images or graphical representations must be at least somewhat sensible. If people can't make sense of the information, it's not understandable and, therefore, useless.
- **Reliable:** After understandable, communications must be reliable. People need to feel confident that the information you are sharing is sound, based on solid research or best practices, and that it can be trusted. If information seems unreliable for any reason, it becomes far less likely to be used.
- **Usable:** Usable information is something people can actually use or act upon. It provides enough depth and clarity to be helpful and relevant. It removes superfluous information and ambiguities. It is also created in media and placed in locations that audiences have good access to and that work well for its purposes.
- **Convenient:** Once a communication moves beyond usable, the goal is to make it convenient. It should be easy to see and process. The message should be simple when possible and use effective information design, binding, and other techniques that make the message not only clear and accurate but easy to engage with.
- **Enjoyable:** Near the top of the hierarchy of needs, good communication is enjoyable. This means it is aesthetically pleasing, interesting, and employs good visual design principles or pleasant and appropriate audible sounds.

- *Meaningful:* At the pinnacle of the communication hierarchy, good communication is meaningful. Achieving this level of communication means you have connected with your audience in a personally meaningful way. You have connected with their values and left a lasting impression.

As you can see from this hierarchy, when we communicate we should aim to truly connect with the people for whom our message is intended. It's not too difficult to create something that is understandable. If people can read it, and it generally makes sense, we've met the lowest requirement. Making information reliable—and then useful—takes a little more effort, but even those levels aren't too difficult to achieve in most circumstances.

If you really want people to engage with and act upon what you are saying—if you want them to read, remember, respond to, and use your message—the goal should be to cross the **experience threshold**, or the point in the business communication hierarchy of needs where a communication moves from functional to meaningful. That means you have to understand how people react to, feel, and think about information. Not everything you create will reach the pinnacle of the hierarchy, but it should at least cross the experience threshold. Even in a simple email, you can make the content convenient by using a clear subject line, adding headings, inserting bulleted lists, and making important content bold.

The goal in designing communication is to do more than provide people the information they need; make it easy and enjoyable for them to process.

### The Triune Brain: The Gut, the Heart, and the Head

Last, when creating information, you'll need to prepare for how people react to, feel about, and reflect upon information. This means you need to understand how the human brain reacts to communication.

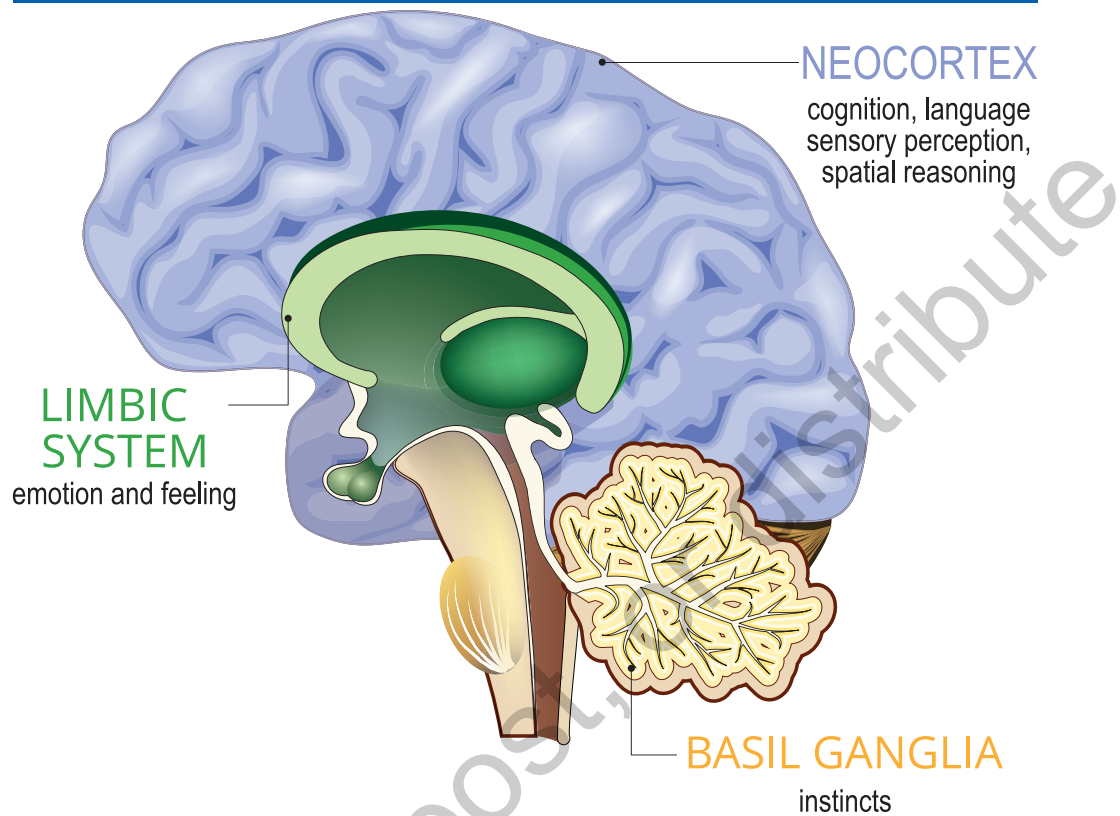
Consider the last time you bought a T-shirt. As you walked through the store, something probably caught your eye—a color, logo, graphic print, or particular style. Attention grabbed, you likely went to check it out: felt the material, held it up to a mirror, maybe even tried it on. Then, you decided if it was worth buying. You scoped out the price, mentally counted how much money you had, determined if this shirt was worth the cost, and finally made the decision to whip out the debit card.

You may not have realized it, but there were three parts of your brain at work during this process—the reptilian, the emotional, and the rational—also known as the gut, the heart, and the head. More officially, it's known as the **triune brain**, a concept first described by neuroscientist Paul MacLean in the 1960s. The idea is that we process what we see in three phases that help us make decisions. Each part of that process is affected by different parts of our brain: the basal ganglia (“reptilian” or “gut”), the limbic system (“emotional” or “heart”), and the neo/frontal cortex (“rational” or “head”) (see Figure 1.6).<sup>23</sup>

When you first saw that T-shirt, you had a visceral, gut reaction. Your basal ganglia ignited, telling you to pay attention. It's an instinctual trigger, and that's why it's often called the “reptilian” brain. It's something you inadvertently responded to, like a reptile would in its natural environment.

Then, you started to feel something. The limbic system was causing you to react to things that resonate with you: color preferences, style, material, cultural popularity, and so forth. Internally, you were having an emotional response, while your brain was saying, *Wow, that's*

FIGURE 1.6 ■ The Triune Brain



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*a nice T-shirt. I bet I'd look good in that.* Researchers call this the “emotional” brain because it’s what makes us feel a personal connection to something.

Finally, your neocortex started thinking rationally: “Can I afford this? Is it worth the expense? Do I like it better than the rest? Is it good quality?” Your rational brain pulls in several factors related to your personal situation—in combination with your emotions—to think logically about the purchase.

Ultimately, the combination of the effects within your triune brain helped you make a decision to either buy the shirt or leave it on the rack.

Communicating with people works the same way. Because all humans have these three parts of the brain, and they’re always looking at information, they will have gut reactions, emotional experiences, and rational thoughts as they process what you are saying and how you are saying it. Usually, these three parts of the brain act so fast we don’t even notice. But rest assured: all three are at work nearly all of the time.

When you create messages for people—especially important messages—you’ll want to have the triune brain in mind so you can grab their attention, keep them interested, and help them make decisions. Consider how asking these questions might change the way you create a message, even one as simple as an email:

### Questions for the Reptilian Brain (Basal Ganglia, or “Gut”)

- How will my audience react when they see this?
- Will this grab their attention, or will they ignore it?
- How can I make them pay attention to this with all the other information they’re being exposed to?

### Questions for the Emotional Brain (Limbic System, or “Heart”)

- How will this message make them feel?
- Does this resonate with their personality, experience, knowledge level, preference, culture, or background?
- Is my message simple, accessible, and interesting enough to keep them engaged and wanting to learn more?

### Questions for the Rational Brain (Frontal Cortex, or “Head”)

- Am I giving them all the information they need to make a decision?
- Is my message clear, unambiguous, and helpful?

As you can see from these three concepts—the communication feedback loop, the communication hierarchy of needs, and the triune brain—there is a lot going on when we communicate. As professional communicators at work, it’s our responsibility to be conscious of how people react to information so that we can prepare the message in the most helpful way possible.

## MAKING EMPATHY AND INCLUSION A TOP PRIORITY

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You’ve learned how your three brains (the head, the heart, and the gut) affect how you communicate, and you have reviewed some ways you can increase your audience’s engagement and understanding. But have you thought about why communicating this way might also contribute to a healthy workplace culture? Communication doesn’t exist in a vacuum—meaning we are constantly taking in information, reacting to messages, and assessing how others perceive and respond to us. Likewise, the messages we’re sending are affecting those around us as well. At the end of the day, every type of work in every type of field needs effective, empathetic, inclusive communicators. This means that a strong professional communicator needs to be in tune with how the people around them are feeling.

For example, in a field predominately thought to be focused on numbers—accounting—firms are looking for strong interpersonal skills to differentiate among candidates. Interpersonal skills are “the new essential skill” in fields like accounting and finance.<sup>24</sup> Some of the most important interpersonal skills include being empathetic and inclusive.

So what is *empathy*? What is *inclusion*? And how do these terms apply to business communication?

**Empathy**, put simply, is the ability to understand how people are feeling. But it's also more than that—it's an awareness of and sensitivity to another person's emotional state. Some would even say it's the ability to vicariously experience what another person is going through. At work, it means being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to understand what they're thinking and feeling, and then to respond appropriately to those feelings, so you can create a workplace environment where people feel heard and understood.

World-renowned social science researcher Brene Brown views empathy as a skill—something you practice as you work on giving and receiving empathy with those around you, including within the workplace.<sup>25</sup> Brown sees empathy as a way to create connections with people. Practicing empathy involves actively listening and asking questions. The research is clear: leaders who practice empathy and active listening have stronger workplace cultures, less employee turnover, and higher levels of job satisfaction.<sup>26</sup>

**Inclusion**, in contrast, refers to openness and accessibility. It means providing, as individuals and organizations, equal access and opportunity to people of all abilities and groups, especially those who are in marginalized populations (Figure 1.7). **Equity**, another related term, is about ensuring each person in an organization receives fair treatment, access, and advancement.<sup>27</sup>

**FIGURE 1.7** ■ Inclusion Is About Openness and Accessibility



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In education, for example, an inclusive classroom strives to create an accessible learning space where all students—regardless of ability or background—have equal opportunity to succeed by making appropriate accommodations. In other situations, inclusion might refer to simply being inclusive of and open to people of any gender, sex, sexual orientation, color, religion, or age.

In the United States, certain classes of people are legally protected from discrimination in the workplace: sex, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, age, ability, and genetic disorder.<sup>28</sup> Put simply, this means it is illegal to discriminate against someone based on these characteristics. However, nondiscrimination is not the same as intentional inclusiveness. Intentional inclusiveness means being purposeful and using intentional actions that foster accessibility, openness, and availability. In fact, many researchers argue that without intentional inclusivity, our natural default as humans is to exclude based on *in-group* and *out-group* psychology.<sup>29</sup>



Interestingly, being inclusive isn't only the right thing to do. It also improves workplace culture and employee creativity. When researchers studied the role of inclusive leadership on employee creativity, they found that leaders who exhibited the hallmark characteristics of inclusivity—openness, accessibility, and availability—increased the creativity habits of employees, thereby increasing a company's competitive advantage.<sup>30</sup>

When the culture of a workplace includes empathy, inclusivity, and active listening, it is also seen as psychologically safe. You will read more about *psychological safety* in Chapter 3.

### Listening, Learning, and Responding to People

How do we create psychological safety in our communication practices? One important way is by incorporating active listening skills. Often when we hear the term “business communication,” we might think of writing and speaking. But active listening is also a critical part of the communication feedback loop. Active listening is an important, yet often underused, workplace habit. A 2017 study by the Graduate Management Admissions Council found that oral communication and listening skills were the top two proficiencies valued by employers. Yet, that same report found that employers felt many employees lacked those interpersonal skills.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Seth Horowitz, auditory neuroscientist from Brown University, found that “listening is a skill we're in danger of losing in a world of digital distractions and information overload.”<sup>32</sup>

Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy, compare active listeners to trampolines. A skilled listener is someone you can “bounce ideas off of.” A good listener “amplifies and supports a speaker's thoughts by providing constructive feedback [... letting speakers] gain energy and height, just like someone jumping on a trampoline.”<sup>33</sup>

Not surprisingly, Zenger and Folkman's research shows that people often think they are better listeners than they actually are. But there are some features of active listening that skilled communicators have in common. Their research surveyed 3,492 participants in a management coaching session. After observing the top 5% of people who were perceived to be the “best listeners,” Zenger and Folkman summarized their research into four main findings:

1. Good listening is much more than being silent while the other person talks.
2. Good listening includes interactions that build a person's self-esteem.
3. Good listening is a cooperative conversation.
4. Good listeners tend to make suggestions.<sup>34</sup>

What Zenger and Folkman learned is that “good listening” is a skill that can be acquired through practice. We will go over the features of active listening and discuss how to practice those skills more in Chapter 3 of this book. For now, consider how active listening as a practice of empathy and inclusion is important both in and out of the workplace, and ponder how learning these skills and habits will increase your ability to connect with people, making you a stronger leader, employee, friend, and colleague.

### Gender, Race, Ability, Religion, and Generational Differences at Work

One of the great things about working in an office environment is getting to know people with different backgrounds, perspectives, life experiences, and opinions. Across the board, researchers find that a diverse workforce stimulates creativity and drives progress. In fact, the McKinsey

Group’s 2020 report on diversity and inclusion found the “business case for diversity is stronger than ever.”<sup>35</sup> The report followed hundreds of companies that had put in place strategic corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs (also called equity, diversity, and inclusion [EDI] programs) and found that although progress can be slow, the efforts have big gains in other ways.

For example, McKinsey found that in terms of both gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity, companies that diversified their workforce, from executive teams to junior colleagues, outperformed their competitors. In matters of gender diversity, the report stated:

Our 2019 analysis finds that companies in the top quartile of gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to experience above-average profitability than peer companies in the fourth quartile. This is up from 21 percent in 2017 and 15 percent in 2014.<sup>36</sup>

The researchers found even higher profitability among workplaces with ethnic and cultural diversity. But the business case for diversity doesn’t stop at profitability.

Companies with a diverse workforce tend to make bolder decisions, corner more market share, and make better investments.<sup>37</sup> It makes sense; doesn’t it? We don’t know what we don’t know, so having a variety of perspectives, life experiences, and cultural backgrounds allows us to grow, learn, and act in new and innovative ways. This is true for a company, and it is true for the employees who work within them.

Having a diverse workforce is not enough to see these gains, however. Inclusion within the workplace culture is what shapes whether the variety of perspectives are allowed to remain and thrive. Implementation of strategic EDI programs is crucial, as is buy-in from executives. But you can start with your communication practices right now as you hone your interpersonal communication skill set.

In addition to gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity, workplaces now more than ever are experiencing a wide variety of working styles and access points.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that many of us will spend a portion of our careers moving between work-from-home (WFH) and in-office environments. Other colleagues might be working longer than they had previously planned, past a retirement date, for example, or more hours at home than they did a decade ago. We likely will be providing closed-captioning for most visual mediums and describing visuals for people who are blind or visually impaired. All of these factors affect how we communicate in business and affect the business feedback loop. A skilled communicator takes all of these pieces into account and incorporates active listening, inclusion, and empathy as part of their regular communication practice to forge stronger relationships and stronger businesses.

In Chapter 3, you’ll learn more about communication strategies for different contexts, including strategies to develop inclusive language. For now, consider common definitions of the following important terms, and reflect on how you can adapt your own communication and interpersonal skills to be more inclusive at work. The definitions in Table 1.1 were developed by the National Association of Counties,<sup>39</sup> but you’ll find similar and nuanced definitions from other organizations that strive for inclusivity in their missions.

### Bias, Intention, and the Language of Inclusivity

You may have heard about implicit or **unconscious bias** more recently in the past few years. Unconscious biases are associations, attitudes, social stereotypes, or judgments we hold, often without realizing, that affect our attitudes and behaviors toward the people around us. For example, if you find yourself walking past a person, and something about them makes you feel

<b>Diversity</b>	The presence of different and multiple characteristics that make up individual and collective identities, including race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, socioeconomic status, language, and physical ability.
<b>Culture</b>	A social system of customs, behaviors, and norms that a group of people develops to ensure its survival and adaptation. It is also a system of values, habits, skills, ideologies, and beliefs.
<b>Race</b>	A social construct that divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (particularly skin color), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, and ethnic classification and often are associated with the social, economic and political needs of a society at a given time.
<b>Gender Expression</b>	The way in which a person embodies or demonstrates their gender outwardly through the ways they act, dress, behave, interact, or other perceived characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine or feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture.
<b>Sex</b>	A set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels and function, and reproductive or sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male, but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed. <sup>40</sup>
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	The sex(es) or gender(s) to whom a person is emotionally, physically, sexually, and/or romantically attracted. Examples of sexual orientation can include gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, asexual, pansexual, queer, etc.
<b>Ethnicity</b>	A common identity based on ancestry, language, culture, nation or region of origin. Ethnic groups can possess shared attributes, including religion, beliefs, customs, and/or shared memories and experiences.

uneasy, although it isn't particularly clear why it makes you uneasy—perhaps their dress, physical mannerisms, language, or even the way they look—you might have an automatic response to look another direction or tighten a grip on your personal belongings. It's that automatic response that evidences the biases you hold, even if you don't realize you're doing it. Business professionals today are consciously making efforts to better understand how our biases influence us and affect our communication and relationships in the workplace—the goal, of course, being to understand our biases and overcome their negative effects on others. First, let's break down how biases affect people at work.

The first thing to know is that everyone has biases. Having bias is part of being human and part of how our brains have evolved to keep us alive. Remember reading about your reptilian brain? That's the part of us that is responsible for our biases. Most of our biases come from our **worldview**, whether we remember acquiring them or not. A worldview is a set of beliefs and orientations each of us carries with us as we interact with the world around us.<sup>41</sup>

Imagine you are a potato simmering in a stew. As you soak with the surrounding ingredients, you will naturally take on the flavors of the onions, the carrots, the celery, and all the spices added to the stew. In essence, you will become a flavorful potato—still a potato but forever changed by your surroundings.

Recognizing that each of us has a unique worldview based on millions of factors can help us communicate with more empathy when working with people who are different from us. Essentially, empathetic language is inclusive language and vice versa. When we approach communication with empathy, we are more likely to use inclusive language. When we mess up, which we all inevitably will, we can apologize and do better next time. Becoming a skilled communicator is about learning from your mistakes and striving to engage in a meaningful way.

One way in which we can work to overcome our biases at work is to use **inclusive language**. Inclusive language, according to the Linguistic Society of America, is the use of words, phrases, and conversation that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.”<sup>42</sup> The use of inclusive language allows all people to feel included, regardless of their gender, race, orientation, familial status, ability, religion, or other characteristics.

Northwestern University<sup>43</sup> compiled a list of terms to avoid and to use to be more inclusive in our language, which we include with modifications in Table 1.2.

TABLE 1.2 ■ Guide to Inclusive Language	
Language to Avoid	Language to Try
Ability Language	
Disabled person, handicapped, crippled, challenged Wheel-chair ridden	Person with a disability Person who uses a wheelchair
Medical Language	
Sufferer or suffering from Diabetic Albino Dwarf, midget	Survivor, living with, being treated for Person with diabetes Person with albinism Short stature, person with dwarfism
Race/Demographic Language	
Generic regions (Oriental, Asian, African) Alien, foreigners Indian Ethnic Old, young person The elderly	Be specific when possible (but also determine if pointing out where a person is from is even necessary) Immigrant, visitors Native American, American Indian, First Nation, or Indigenous person Person of color Person Older adults
Gender Language	
Him, her, he, she (when preference is unknown) Stewardess Actress Congressman, mailman, freshman Transgendered Bathroom bill Man and wife Mankind “Hey, guys” to greet someone	They, their Flight attendant Actor Congress person, legislator, mail carrier, first-year student Transgendered person Nondiscrimination law Husband and wife, partners People, human beings, humanity “Hi, everyone” or “Hi, all”

Language to Avoid	Language to Try
Mental Health Language	
Mentally ill, mentally disabled, crazy, insane, Psycho, schizo, retarded Bipolar person Down's	Person with DSM diagnosis Person with bipolar disorder Person with Down syndrome
Addiction Language	
Addict Substance abuse Alcoholic On the wagon	Person struggling with addiction Substance use disorder, person living with substance use disorder Person with alcoholism In recovery
Religion Language	
Bible thumper, holy roller Mormon Heeb Towelhead, hajji	Practicing Christian, evangelical, protestant Member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Jew, Jewish Person of Islamic or Muslim faith
Socioeconomic Language	
Inner city, ghetto Disadvantaged The homeless The hungry	Under-resourced community Neighborhoods with high poverty rates People experiencing homelessness People experiencing hunger

Source: Northwestern University. (2019). Inclusive language guide. *The Family Institute*. <https://counseling.northwestern.edu/blog/inclusive-language-guide/>

You will learn how to self-reflect on your own biases and how to incorporate inclusive language into your communication practices—verbal, written, and visual—in Chapters 3 and 4. It's important to hone these interpersonal skills to be an effective communicator. That's what this book is all about.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

As the organizational flow of information within businesses has changed, our communication practices and habits have changed over time as well. Throughout history, cultures have organized themselves around the flow of information. Past civilizations in ancient Persia (what we know today as Iran), Rome, China, India, and countries in Africa used a type of postal system to spread information to their inhabitants. They would send decrees through a designated messenger on horseback or foot, and it would take weeks, months, and sometimes even years for the information to be received, encoded, and sent back. This pace of information flow directly affected the organizational culture of these societies.<sup>44</sup> This is still true today.

The flow of information (communication) affects, and is affected by, the organizational culture around it. We choose to send certain types of messages in certain types of formats because of how our organizations are structured—those communication choices then structure our

organizations. Our choice to use a text message instead of a phone call is likely influenced by a variety of factors, organizational culture being one of them.

Think about the different communities you interact with. How do you primarily communicate? How does information and communication flow within this community? An exclusively online community, such as a work-from-home team within a department, might typically use email, texting, or chat features. However, they might also find that using only written forms of communication hinders their ability to accomplish certain tasks or meet certain metrics. Organizationally, as a team, they might decide they need to schedule weekly video calls to add a richness to their organizational communication that they were not finding in strictly written communication.

So what is organizational communication and organizational culture?

- **Organizational communication** is a field of study that focuses on the flow of information and communication within organizations.
- **Organizational culture** is the result of how information and communication flow within an organization.

Scholars in these fields study how communication and information affect social and organizational structures. They might analyze how a workplace disseminates crucial human resources information and then make suggestions for how to provide better information access to all employees. These scholars might also explore how informal communication differs from formal communication within a chain of command.<sup>45</sup>

Within an organization there are typically two overarching types of communication: internal and external. Communication that is internal might include company emails, internal websites or message boards, instant messaging channels, memos and reports, employee reviews, and quarterly statements. External communication might include business-to-business messaging, client-facing messaging, external reports or white papers, marketing and sales messaging, and anything else that is meant for “outside eyes.”

As a professional communicator, it’s important that you understand the contextual differences among these types of communication and facilitate the information flow and exchange of ideas.

In a workplace setting, two main factors affect the flow of information:

1. Our role in the exchange of ideas (ease of information flow): This includes issues of communication transparency, usability of messaging, and openness of communication channels.
2. Hierarchical communication and the distribution of information (impact of power structures on information flow): This includes social and hierarchical structures that prohibit or enhance the flow of information

Each of these factors will be explained in more detail as we go. As you continue reading, think about how communication affects organizational culture and vice versa. You might gain some interesting insights about your own communication habits and practices.

### Our Role in the Exchange of Ideas

First, each of us plays a role in how messages are exchanged. As communicators, we can prioritize communication transparency, message usability and access, and openness of communication channels.

### Individual Roles in Message Exchange

Consider an example about Brooklyn, the executive director of a national nonprofit agency we will call Solutions First. At any given point during the day, Brooklyn hears dozens of pitches for new programs. Her nonprofit focuses on reducing barriers to homelessness—a problem exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing and minimal oversight over the fees landlords can charge for rentals. Her staff is ambitious and motivated, typically throwing themselves into their efforts, especially when Brooklyn calls an all-hands meeting—a meeting where all in the organization are brought together to discuss company matters—for a brainstorming session.

After 10 years as the executive director, Brooklyn has nearly perfected the art of listening to ideas and providing feedback and guidance. She listens to each pitch and writes them on a whiteboard to demonstrate that all ideas are equally valued at this stage of the brainstorming process. She strategically keeps the flow of information as open as possible; everyone has access to this flow, and anyone can contribute to it. Because of her transparency, Brooklyn has cultivated a climate that fosters “constructive criticism and dissent” as information is exchanged in the marketplace of ideas.<sup>46</sup>

After the initial outpouring of ideas, Brooklyn knows she needs to quickly provide feedback to further guide the discussion. She has practiced listening to and filtering ideas, so she fires up those interpersonal skills, asking questions about ideas and encouraging others to do the same. Not only is Brooklyn using her interpersonal skills to filter and develop ideas as the leader, but she is also modeling those skills for her staff. They see her openness and transparency within the flow of information and the exchange of ideas that is occurring. They trust Brooklyn to listen to their ideas and identify gaps in those ideas. They also trust Brooklyn to anticipate the needs of the organization and align those needs with the enthusiasm and capabilities of the staff.

Brooklyn is demonstrating characteristics of what we might call a superpower: the ability to synthesize and weave information together during the exchange of ideas through listening, empathy, and communication. This superpower enables Brooklyn to communicate her ideas clearly and also to practice openness and transparency as she facilitates the exchange of ideas on a regular basis. Not surprisingly, research in the fields of organizational behavior and leadership shows what you probably already understand from this story: the skills Brooklyn exhibits and models contribute to increased psychological safety in the workplace, which in turn increases a healthy exchange of ideas.<sup>47</sup>

### Hierarchical Communication and the Distribution of Information

The openness of the 21st-century workplace necessitates an openness of information flow. As more workplaces become global and as more companies adopt hybrid models of working from home and working in office, our communication and information flows will also become more adaptable. For instance, the democratization of workplace communication is becoming increasingly prevalent. Google is famous for holding all-hands meetings with an open mic and unscripted access to question-and-answer sessions with executives. The company also shares its quarterly board report with all 140,000 employees.<sup>48</sup>

Google distributes much of its information in a flattened distribution channel rather than a hierarchical one; each employee has equal access to information at roughly the same time, pace,

and ability. This type of flattened communication can be useful in cultivating a democratic workplace culture that values and promotes psychological safety.

In assessing the distribution and flow of information, consider the following questions:

1. How does the flow and distribution of information within the organization reinforce or change the power relationships within the organization?
2. Do status changes, such as promotions or demotions, change communication-sharing behaviors?
3. How and when do employees at each level of the organization access information?

Ultimately, the flow and distribution of information is crucial in cultivating a workplace that is enjoyable, ethical, and exciting. Your role as a strategic communicator within any organization is essential to its culture.

### THAT'S THEIR STORY. WHAT'S YOURS?

At the beginning of the chapter, we shared a story about Kat Cole, former president of Cinnabon and chief operating officer and president of Athletic Greens. She built a reputation at a young age for connecting with people and found herself training employees of the company all over the world by age 19. When Cole started as president at Cinnabon, one of the first things she did was visit the bakeries, spending hours at different franchise locations, getting to know the people of the company, and listening to their questions and concerns.

That's her story. Now take a moment to think about the work you do or have done, and in a short essay or discussion, answer the following questions:

- What can you do to get to know people better?
- In what ways do you feel knowing and understanding how people think, act, and feel can help you in your career?

### SKILLS MASTERY WORKSHOP: UNDERSTANDING PEOPLE

#### Application and Exploration

Visit a business in your community where you can observe the way the business communicates with employees and how employees communicate with each other. What do you see? What types of interpersonal communication do you observe, and what is your sense for how well people understand and empathize with each other? Write down your observations, and discuss them with others in class. How is what you observed different from what others observed?

Observe a business professional whose communication skills you admire. How do they interact with other people? How do they adapt to different situations? What strategies and techniques do you see them exhibiting that you would like to adapt in your own communication?

Interview a leader at a local company in your community to learn about the role of communication in their profession. As you develop questions to ask, consider the types of communication channels they use at work, what some of the best communication practices are that they employ,



what communication challenges they face, and how communication has changed in their job over the last several years.

Search the DEI statement of an organization you admire. How do you feel their statement, if applied, might positively affect how employees interact with each other in the workplace? Is there anything you would add to the statement to help them create a workplace environment that better fosters inclusion and diversity?

### Practice in Context

#### SCENARIO #1: TRAIN DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Imagine you work as a part of the computer support team at your work. You have recently learned a large number of employees at your company is struggling to learn a new software program they must implement. You also learn the challenges seem to vary by age and experience level within the company. It is your task to train employees on the new software. Start by asking a few questions:

- How will people with advanced experience in computers and software differ in terms of what they need in training from people who have less experience? How will employees' job descriptions and software usage affect the way you think about approaching them?
- Should this kind of training be done through a simple email? A videoconference with screen share? An in-person workshop? Something else? What types of documents might benefit those learning the program—do they need fact sheets, instruction sets, simple diagrams with images, a slide deck with notes, or something else?
- How would you determine if your approach to teaching the new software worked for the people who used your training? Would you ask them how much they know about the program before you begin? Would you offer a brief quiz afterward that addresses key concepts?

Now, try it! Select a software program you are familiar with, and imagine you have to teach one concept within that program to three different audiences. Describe what each audience's characteristics are in terms of relevant demographics, experience level, and time with the company. Then, create differing training materials that best meet the needs of each audience.

#### SCENARIO #2: IMPROVE A DOCUMENT

Find a document you feel struggles to meet the needs of its audience because of poor communication. Consider the communication feedback loop, the communication hierarchy of needs, and the triune brain. Also, consider whether or not the document is both empathetic and inclusive. Now respond to the following questions:

- Who was the intended audience for this document? What are the characteristics of that audience? Think in terms of age, experience, background, culture, and so forth.
- How did the document fail to best meet the needs of the audience? In what areas discussed in this chapter did the author of the document miss the mark?
- What would you do to improve the document?

Now, try it! Recreate the document by addressing the communication problems and meeting the audience's needs. Can you create something that is more adapted to the audience than the original? What makes it more effective?

## KEY TERMS

Accessibility	Inclusive Language
All-Hands Meeting	Information Design
Communication Feedback Loop	Medium
Diversity	Multinational
Decode	Noise
Empathy	Organizational Communication
Emoji	Organizational Culture
Encode	Receiver
Equity	Sender
Experience Threshold	Satisfice
Feedback	Triune Brain
Globalization	Unconscious Bias
Hierarchy of Needs	User-Centered
Homogeneous	Workplace Culture
Inclusion	Worldview

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