

# Small Group Member Communication and Personality Traits

## 3

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. differentiate between a communication trait and a personality trait,
2. identify and define the four communication traits discussed in this chapter,
3. identify and define the three personality traits discussed in this chapter,
4. explain how communication and personality traits impact group work, and
5. develop a profile of the ideal group member based on traits.

**Case Study** | Abdul arrives home after attending a committee meeting on loss prevention at Aim, a department store where he has worked as a shift supervisor for the past two years. His wife, Ashley, is waiting for him and the dinner he was supposed to bring home.





**Photo 3.1** Working in a small group allows members to communicate through a variety of verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

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**Ashley:** Hey, where were you?

**Abdul:** (mumbles something as he hangs up his coat)

**Ashley:** I've told you a hundred times, I can't understand you when you mumble. Where's the food? I'm starving.

**Abdul:** I forgot the food. My committee meeting with my loss prevention group lasted twice as long as I planned.

**Ashley:** Why did the meeting last so long?

**Abdul:** Because my group members are driving me crazy.

**Ashley:** How so?

**Abdul:** Well, there's James who just sits there, never saying a word. When anyone asks him a specific question, he just nods his head and says as little as possible. He talks so softly, I can't hear what he is saying. When

I was talking to him, I tried to make eye contact with him but he kept looking away. He's so nervous. He makes me feel uncomfortable.

**Ashley:** Is everyone else quiet?

**Abdul:** I wish. There's this guy Vinnie who has something to say about everything. When I told him I disagreed with him, he told me I was stupid and lacked his personal experiences and that I should keep my mouth shut. It took all my self-control not to yell at him. During the meeting, I think he insulted everyone at least twice.

**Ashley:** Did anyone say anything to him?

**Abdul:** Well, there is this other member, Sachiko. She talks a lot, too, and often disagrees with what is being said, but I like her because she always stays on topic. She has a way of talking to you where she disagrees with you but doesn't put you down at the same time. She allows everyone to make their points and really seems to care about what others have to say. I like her the best and hope she becomes the leader of the group. She tried to tell Vinnie that we needed to stay constructive and develop a solution, but he just rolled his eyes.

**Ashley:** What do you think the other group members think about you?

**Abdul:** They probably think that I don't want to be there, and they're right. A couple of times they would get off track, talking about their personal lives and what they were going to do after work, and I had to interrupt their gabbing to remind them that we needed to stay focused on the task at hand. I'm not there to make friends. I just want us to prepare our loss prevention plan, delegate the work responsibilities, and meet with the manager next week. I have better things to do than spend time with this particular work group, and I don't need any more friends.

**Ashley:** (sarcastically) With that attitude, I bet you're the most popular person in the group.

**Abdul:** Okay, okay, okay. I guess I could have a better attitude about my group. I just get frustrated when I have to work with others, especially when the other people don't communicate like I do.

**Ashley:** (a little less sarcastically) With a little effort, you'll get along fine with your group. Maybe someday they will learn to love and appreciate you as much as I do.

**Abdul:** Very funny. What's for dinner?

**Ashley:** You were supposed to bring dinner home from Cha-Cha's, remember?

**Abdul:** Oh yeah.

**Ashley:** Grab your coat. You're driving, and you're paying.



In this case study, Abdul describes his group members, and we read, in the brief descriptions, how the group members' communication behaviors differ. Some group members are quiet and reserved while others are loud and outgoing. Some discuss an issue constructively while others attack the person with whom they are speaking instead of focusing on the topic being discussed. Some members talk to demonstrate control while other members think before they speak.

This chapter aims to explore the communication and personality traits group members possess. To do so, we will define the term *trait* and differentiate between a communication trait and a personality trait. We then will examine four prevalent communication traits and three prevalent personality traits. Finally, we will summarize the research conducted on these communication and personality traits in the small group.

## Definition and Differentiation of Traits

Think of **traits** as relatively enduring behaviors that people tend to use consistently across their life span. For instance, if Abdul possesses the assertiveness trait, he would be expected to assert himself across different situations and contexts—not to say that the specific situation would not influence his behavior (i.e., Abdul might project more assertiveness toward his loss prevention group than he would toward his wife). However, a person high in trait assertiveness would display it more often in more situations than a person low in trait assertiveness. Trait researchers do not deny that the situation influences how a person behaves; they just believe that traits play a significant role in why and how people communicate.

A **communication trait** is defined as an individual's consistencies and differences in message-sending and -receiving behaviors (Infante & Rancer, 1996), and a **personality trait** is defined as an individual's psychological makeup comprising attitudes, values, beliefs, experiences, and behaviors. Communication traits differ from personality traits in that communication traits focus specifically on how people use verbal and nonverbal messages to stimulate meaning in receivers' minds (Infante, Rancer, & Womack, 2003). In a way, communication traits can be considered a subset of a person's personality traits.

This chapter will introduce you to several communication and personality traits. Because communication is vital to the small group communication process, we will focus first on communication traits.

## Communication Traits

Although a person possesses many communication traits (Frey, 1997; Haslett & Ruebush, 1999; Keyton & Frey, 2002), we will focus on four communication traits known to influence how group members communicate: communication apprehension, communicator style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness.

### *Communication Apprehension*

Arguably the most researched communication trait, **communication apprehension** describes “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Generally, an individual ranks high, moderate, or low in communication apprehension. An individual who is high in communication apprehension almost always feels apprehensive about communicating with other people whereas an individual who is low in communication apprehension hardly ever feels apprehensive about communicating with other people. An individual who is moderate in communication apprehension falls somewhere between being highly fearful and not being fearful at all, and tends to be more flexible in dealing with communication apprehension on a daily basis.

According to James McCroskey (1984), communication apprehension can emerge in four forms: trait, context-based, audience-based, and situational. **Trait apprehension** refers to a relatively enduring level of apprehension across a variety of situations. People who are high in trait communication apprehension feel anxious about communicating across all situations. Whether communication involves talking during a job interview, participating in a class discussion, or giving a public speech in the community, a person with high trait communication apprehension usually will experience anxiety and apprehension. On the other hand, a person who is low in trait communication apprehension will feel comfortable in most situations and not experience any discomfort or anxiety.

**Context-based apprehension**, a form of apprehension tied to a specific context (i.e., small group, meetings, interpersonal, public speaking), is based on the idea that people sometimes feel comfortable talking in one context and anxious in another. Some people feel completely comfortable talking to almost anyone face-to-face but experience a great deal of anxiety when giving a public speech. Other

people may experience no anxiety when giving a formal presentation in front of a crowd but a great deal of apprehension when attempting to communicate in a small group.

**Audience-based apprehension** is linked to communicating with a specific audience. Some people, though low in trait communication apprehension, may experience apprehension when it comes to communicating, for example, with their superiors at work. In the case study, Abdul might not worry about communicating in groups most of the time, but if he is attracted to or annoyed with someone in the group, he might experience some apprehension when communicating with that person in the group setting.

A person experiences **situational apprehension** when communicating with a given person in a particular situation. For instance, Sachiko might not normally feel apprehension about communicating with her group, but if everyone in the group has completed the group assignment except her, she might experience some apprehension about confronting her group with the news of her unpreparedness. Note that almost everyone, including you, will experience situational apprehension at one time or another.

A person with communication apprehension will experience internal anxiety and discomfort (McCroskey & Beatty, 1998), which may or may not manifest itself in external signs of nervousness or apprehensiveness about communicating with others. These external signs include the physiological (e.g., sweating, increased heart rate, blushing) and the interactive. Based on the research conducted on communication apprehension, communication researchers James McCroskey, John Daly, and Gail Sorensen (1976) compiled a profile of the highly apprehensive person and the minimally apprehensive person. For instance, highly communication-apprehensive individuals often act aloof, prefer to work alone, get easily annoyed, withdraw, and dislike interaction whereas minimally communication-apprehensive individuals are calm, self-assured, ego-involved, decisive, and relaxed. Though not exhaustive, this profile provides an idea about feeling,

thought, and behavior differences in highly and minimally communication-apprehensive individuals.

Ultimately, the only way to identify people as high-communication apprehensives is if they admit to being apprehensive. Complete the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension scale developed by communication scholar

“ *Ethically Speaking:* How acceptable is it for group members to attribute their group participation or involvement (or lack thereof) to their communication apprehension? ”

James C. McCroskey to identify your trait communication apprehension and your apprehension in four contexts: small group settings, meetings, interpersonal settings, and public speaking settings.

### Assessment Tool 3.1 Personal Report of Communication Apprehension

This questionnaire contains statements about communicating with other people. Indicate the extent to which each statement applies to you personally according to the following scale.

If you **strongly agree** with the statement, write 1 in the blank.

If you **agree** with the statement, write 2 in the blank.

If you are **undecided** about the statement, write 3 in the blank.

If you **disagree** with the statement, write 4 in the blank.

If you **strongly disagree** with the statement, write 5 in the blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Usually, I am calm and relaxed while participating in meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I am very calm and relaxed when called on to express an opinion at a meeting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I am giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

*(Continued)*



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*Scoring:*

1. Take a base score of **18**. To this score, add your scores for items 2, 4, and 6. Subtract your scores for items 1, 3, and 5. This is your **small group** communication apprehension score.
2. Take a base score of **18**. To this score, add your scores for items 8, 9, and 12. Subtract your scores for items 7, 10, and 11. This is your **meetings** communication apprehension score.
3. Take a base score of **18**. To this score, add your scores for items 14, 16, and 17. Subtract your scores for items 13, 15, and 18. This is your **interpersonal** communication apprehension score.
4. Take a base score of **18**. To this score, add your scores for items 19, 21, and 23. Subtract your scores for items 20, 22, and 24. This is your **public speaking** communication apprehension score.
5. To compute your trait communication apprehension score, add the score from each step.

A score (in step 5) between 80 and 120 indicates you are **high** in communication apprehension.

A score (in step 5) between 51 and 79 indicates you are **moderate** in communication apprehension.

A score (in step 5) between 24 and 50 indicates you are **low** in communication apprehension.

*Source:* Reprinted with permission of James C. McCroskey.

It is important to consider, though, that if an individual exhibits high communication apprehension, she will not necessarily be quiet. Some highly communication-apprehensive individuals talk too much from nervousness, and some minimally communication-apprehensive individuals hardly talk at all because they simply are not interested in communicating.

## Communicator Style

**Communicator style** describes the way an individual uses verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors to indicate how literally others should take a message (Norton, 1978, 1986). According to communication scholar Robert Norton (1978, 1983), an individual's communicator style comprises any combination of 10 communicative attributes: friendly, impression leaving, relaxed, contentious, attentive, precise, animated, dramatic, open, and dominant. Based on Norton's (1978, 1983)



### Assessment Tool 3.2 Communicator Style Measure

This questionnaire contains statements about your communicative behaviors. Indicate how often each statement is true for you personally according to the following scale.

If the statement is **almost always true**, write 5 in the blank.

If the statement is **often true**, write 4 in the blank.

If the statement is **occasionally true**, write 3 in the blank.

If the statement is **rarely true**, write 2 in the blank.

If the statement is **almost never true**, write 1 in the blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am comfortable with all varieties of people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I laugh easily.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I readily express admiration for others.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. What I say usually leaves an impression on people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I leave people with an impression of me that they definitely tend to remember.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. To be friendly, I verbally acknowledge others' contributions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I am a very good communicator.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I have some nervous mannerisms in my speech.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I am a very relaxed communicator.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. When I disagree with others, I am very quick to challenge them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I can always repeat back to a person exactly what he or she meant.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. The sound of my voice is very easy to recognize.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I am a very precise communicator.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I leave a definite impression on people.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. The rhythm or flow of my speech is sometimes affected by nervousness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Under pressure, I come across as a relaxed speaker.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. My eyes reflect exactly what I am feeling when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I dramatize a lot.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I always find it very easy to communicate on a one-to-one basis with people I do not know very well.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Usually, I deliberately react in such a way that people know I am listening to them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. Usually, I do not tell people much about myself until I get to know them well.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. I tell jokes, anecdotes, and stories when I communicate.

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- \_\_\_\_ 23. I tend to constantly gesture when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_ 24. I am an extremely open communicator.
- \_\_\_\_ 25. I am a vocally loud communicator.
- \_\_\_\_ 26. In a small group of people I do not know very well, I am a very good communicator.
- \_\_\_\_ 27. In arguments or differences of opinion, I insist upon very precise definitions.
- \_\_\_\_ 28. In most situations, I speak very frequently.
- \_\_\_\_ 29. I find it extremely easy to maintain a conversation with a member of the opposite sex.
- \_\_\_\_ 30. I like to be strictly accurate when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_ 31. Because I have a loud voice, I can easily break into a conversation.
- \_\_\_\_ 32. Often I physically and vocally act out when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_ 33. I have an assertive voice.
- \_\_\_\_ 34. I readily reveal personal things about myself.
- \_\_\_\_ 35. I am dominant in conversations.
- \_\_\_\_ 36. I am very argumentative.
- \_\_\_\_ 37. Once I get wound up in a heated discussion, I have a hard time stopping myself.
- \_\_\_\_ 38. I am an extremely friendly communicator.
- \_\_\_\_ 39. I really like to listen very carefully to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 40. I insist that other people document or present some kind of proof for what they are arguing.
- \_\_\_\_ 41. I try to take charge of things when I am with people.
- \_\_\_\_ 42. It bothers me to drop an argument that is not resolved.
- \_\_\_\_ 43. In most situations I tend to come on strong.
- \_\_\_\_ 44. I am very expressive nonverbally.
- \_\_\_\_ 45. The way I say something usually leaves an impression on people.
- \_\_\_\_ 46. Whenever I communicate, I tend to be very encouraging to people.
- \_\_\_\_ 47. I actively use a lot of facial expressions when I communicate.
- \_\_\_\_ 48. I verbally exaggerate to emphasize a point.
- \_\_\_\_ 49. I am an extremely attentive communicator.
- \_\_\_\_ 50. As a rule, I openly express my feelings and emotions.

**Scoring:**

Reverse score items 8, 15, and 21. (If you put a 5 for item 8, change this score to 1; if 4, change this score to 2; if 2, change this score to 4; if 1, change this score to 5.)

1. Add your scores for items 3, 6, 38, and 46. This is your **friendly** score.
2. Add your scores for items 4, 5, 14, and 45. This is your **impression leaving** score.
3. Add your scores for items 8, 9, 15, and 16. This is your **relaxed** score.
4. Add your scores for items 10, 36, 37, and 42. This is your **contentious** score.
5. Add your scores for items 11, 20, 39, and 49. This is your **attentive** score.
6. Add your scores for items 13, 27, 30, and 40. This is your **precise** score.
7. Add your scores for items 17, 23, 44, and 47. This is your **animated** score.
8. Add your scores for items 18, 22, 32, and 48. This is your **dramatic** score.
9. Add your scores for items 21, 24, 34, and 50. This is your **open** score.
10. Add your scores for items 28, 35, 41, and 43. This is your **dominant** score.

*Source:* Reprinted by permission of Blackwell Publishing from Norton, R. W. (1978). Foundations of a communicator style construct. *Human Communication Research*, 4, 99–112.

work, Scott Myers, Matthew Martin, and Timothy Mottet (2000) offered the following definitions. *Friendly* people, generally considered kind and caring, recognize others in a positive way. The *impression leaving* communicate using a memorable style. *Relaxed* communicators appear anxiety-free, calm, and at ease when engaged in interactions with others. *Contentious* individuals like to argue and may seem belligerent at times. *Attentive* communicators, concerned with understanding others, listen effectively. *Precise* communicators try to be strictly accurate, using well-defined arguments and specific proof or evidence to clarify their positions. *Animated* communicators use eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body movement, and posture to exaggerate content. *Dramatic* communicators use stylistic devices (e.g., exaggerations, rhythm, stories) to underscore content. *Open* communicators are straightforward and do not have problems directly communicating their thoughts or emotions. *Dominant* communicators “take charge” of the situation by talking louder, longer, and more frequently than others. Generally, an individual will use several attributes at the same time (Norton, 1983), which creates an individual’s communicator style, or **cluster**. For example, a dominant person also may be animated, dramatic, and/or impression leaving, and an attentive person also may be friendly and relaxed (Norton, 1978). If you complete the Communicator Style Measure, you should be able to identify your communicator style.



**Photo 3.2** A group member who communicates using the dramatic, animated, and impression leaving attributes will not likely be forgotten.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/mammamaart.

Despite arguments that some attributes appear preferable over other attributes, note there is no preferred cluster of communicator style attributes per se. Yet researchers have found that organizational employees prefer their superiors to use the relaxed, friendly, and attentive attributes (Infante & Gorden, 1991); college students prefer their professors to use the friendly, relaxed, dramatic, and impression leaving attributes (Nussbaum, 1992); charismatic leaders use the attentive, relaxed, friendly, and dominant attributes (Holladay & Coombs, 1994); and strong public speakers use the dominant, animated, open, friendly, dramatic, and attentive attributes (Holladay & Coombs, 1993).

## Argumentativeness

**Argumentativeness** comprises an individual's ability to defend his position on a controversial issue while simultaneously attempting to refute another person's position on the same issue (Infante & Rancer, 1982). From this definition, an argumentative individual rationally discusses a topic and does not engage in personal attacks against others. People high in argumentativeness are more likely to initiate an argument and less likely to back away from an argument than people low in argumentativeness.

? Of the 10 communicator style attributes, which attributes (or cluster) would you find desirable in a group member? Why?

Highly argumentative individuals feel more motivated to argue (Rancer & Infante, 1985), have a greater number of positive beliefs about arguing (Rancer, Baukus, & Infante, 1985), and perceive an argument as more enjoyable (Rancer, Kosberg, & Baukus, 1992) than minimally argumentative individuals. Highly argumentative people also often grow more involved in interactions, and those with whom they interact perceive them as more credible than minimally argumentative people (Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1991). To determine your level of argumentativeness, complete the Argumentativeness Scale.

According to argumentativeness experts Dominic Infante and Andrew Rancer (1996), engaging in argumentativeness offers many benefits. When people argue, they learn more, become less egocentric, realize how others think and why, and become aware of information previously unknown to them. Argumentative

### Assessment Tool 3.3 Argumentativeness Scale

This questionnaire contains statements about controversial issues. Indicate how often each statement is true for you personally according to the following scale.

If the statement is **almost always true**, write 5 in the blank.

If the statement is **often true**, write 4 in the blank.

If the statement is **occasionally true**, write 3 in the blank.

If the statement is **rarely true**, write 2 in the blank.

If the statement is **almost never true**, write 1 in the blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. While in an argument, I worry that the person I am arguing with will form a negative impression of me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Arguing over controversial issues improves my intelligence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I enjoy avoiding arguments.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am energetic and enthusiastic when I argue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Once I finish an argument, I promise myself that I will not get into another argument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Arguing with a person creates more problems than it solves.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I have a pleasant, good feeling when I win a point in an argument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. When I finish arguing with someone, I feel nervous and upset.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I get an unpleasant feeling when I realize I am about to get into an argument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I enjoy defending my point of view on an issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. I am happy when I keep an argument from happening.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I do not like to miss the opportunity to argue over a controversial issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. I prefer being with people who rarely disagree with me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. I consider an argument to be an exciting intellectual challenge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. I find myself unable to think of effective points during an argument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I feel refreshed and satisfied after an argument on a controversial issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. I have the ability to do well in an argument.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. I try to avoid getting into arguments.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. I feel excitement when I expect that a conversation I am in is leading to an argument.

#### Scoring:

1. Add your scores for items 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, and 20.
2. Add 60 to the sum obtained in step 1.

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3. Add your scores for items 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 19.
4. Subtract the sum obtained in step 3 from the total obtained in step 2. This is your argumentativeness score.

A score (in step 4) between 73 and 100 indicates you are **high** in argumentativeness.

A score (in step 4) between 56 and 72 indicates you are **moderate** in argumentativeness.

A score (in step 4) between 20 and 55 indicates you are **low** in argumentativeness.

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*Source:* Infante, D. A., & Rancer, A. S. (1982). A conceptualization and measure of argumentativeness. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 46, 72–80. Reproduced with permission of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

individuals also improve their abilities in perspective taking, which is important when individuals attempt to influence others. Additionally, researchers have found that people enjoy communicating with argumentative individuals, including coworkers, superiors, and professors (Infante & Gorden, 1985, 1989; Myers & Knox, 2000). Argumentativeness, however, sports a downside: When extremely argumentative individuals invest highly or put a personal stake in the issue, communicating with them presents a challenge (Frantz & Seburn, 2003).

### Verbal Aggressiveness

Although argumentativeness falls into the category of constructive communication traits, verbal aggressiveness fits in with destructive communication traits. **Verbal aggressiveness**, or the tendency for an individual to attack the self-concept of another individual for the purpose of inflicting psychological harm (Infante & Wigley, 1986), is a form of symbolic aggression. From this definition, a verbally aggressive individual does not attack the topic or the issue; rather, a verbally aggressive individual attacks some attribute of a person (Infante, 1987; Kinney, 1994). These attributes are listed in Table 3.1. People displaying high verbal aggressiveness use these messages more frequently than people displaying low verbal aggressiveness (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992), and they believe the use of these verbally aggressive messages is justified (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996). To determine your level of verbal aggressiveness, complete the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale.

At times, the situation can increase the likelihood of a person communicating in a verbally aggressive manner (Wigley, 1998). When the discussion topic particularly interests someone and the impact or consequence of winning the discussion is high, a person may more likely resort to using a verbally aggressive message.

**Table 3.1** Types of Verbally Aggressive Messages

1. Making derogatory comments about a group member's character or competence
2. Making derogatory comments about a group member's background or physical appearance
3. Making derogatory comments about a group member's friends or romantic partner
4. Making derogatory comments about a group member's group memberships
5. Ridiculing or making fun of how a group member communicates
6. Swearing at a group member
7. Using sarcasm to belittle a group member
8. Teasing a group member
9. Threatening to physically or psychologically harm a group member

Source: Based on Infante, D. A. (1987). Aggressiveness. In J. C. McCroskey & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Personality and interpersonal communication* (pp. 157–192). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

### Assessment Tool 3.4 Verbal Aggressiveness Scale

This questionnaire is concerned with how we try to get people to comply with our wishes. For each statement, please indicate the extent to which you feel it is true for you in your attempts to influence others.

If the statement is **almost always true**, write 5 in the blank.

If the statement is **often true**, write 4 in the blank.

If the statement is **occasionally true**, write 3 in the blank.

If the statement is **rarely true**, write 2 in the blank.

If the statement is **almost never true**, write 1 in the blank.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am extremely careful to avoid attacking individuals' intelligence when I attack their ideas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. When individuals are very stubborn, I use insults to soften the stubbornness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I try very hard to avoid having other people feel bad about themselves when I try to influence them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When people refuse to do a task I know is important, without good reason, I tell them that they are unreasonable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. When other people do things I regard as stupid, I try to be extremely gentle with them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. If individuals I am trying to influence really deserve it, I attack their character.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When people behave in ways that are in very poor taste, I insult them in order to shock them into proper behavior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I try to make people feel good about themselves even when their ideas are stupid.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance, I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. When people criticize my shortcomings, I take it in good humor and do not try to get back at them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. When individuals insult me, I get a lot of pleasure out of really telling them off.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. When I dislike individuals greatly, I try not to show it in what I say or how I say it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. I like poking fun at people who do things that are very stupid in order to stimulate their intelligence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. When I attack others' ideas, I try not to damage their self-concept.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. When I try to influence people, I make a great effort not to offend them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. When people do things that are mean or cruel, I attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. I refuse to participate in arguments when they involve personal attacks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. When nothing seems to work in trying to influence others, I yell and scream in order to get some movement from them.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. When I am not able to refute others' positions, I try to make them feel defensive in order to weaken their positions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. When an argument shifts to personal attacks, I try very hard to change the subject.

*Scoring:*

1. Add your scores for items 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, and 19.
2. Add your scores for items 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, and 20.
3. Subtract the sum obtained in step 2 from 60.
4. Add the sum obtained in step 1 to the score obtained in step 3. This is your verbal aggressiveness score.

A score (in step 4) between 59 and 100 indicates you are **high** in verbal aggressiveness.

A score (in step 4) between 39 and 58 indicates you are **moderate** in verbal aggressiveness.

A score (in step 4) between 20 and 38 indicates you are **low** in verbal aggressiveness.

*Source:* From "Verbal Aggressiveness: An Interpersonal Model and Measure," by D. A. Infante & C. J. Wigley, III, 1986, *Communication Quarterly*, 53, pp. 61–69. Reproduced with permission of Routledge Publishing, Inc.

Other times—especially when they are reciprocating a verbally aggressive message to a prior hurtful message (Martin et al., 1996)—people believe the use of verbal aggression is justified. However, research indicates that responding to one verbally aggressive message with another makes the situation worse, not better (Sutter & Martin, 1998). Verbal aggressiveness also stems from frustration; in fact, individuals sometimes use verbally aggressive messages because they are frustrated they do not know how to argue constructively (Infante, 1988).

No known positive outcomes to using verbally aggressive messages exist (Infante & Rancer, 1996), primarily because verbally aggressive people seem less likable (Myers & Johnson, 2003) and less agreeable (Blickle, Habasch, & Senft, 1998). This is not a big surprise, given that people in general dislike being the target of verbal aggressiveness. For example, employees produce less work under a verbally aggressive supervisor (Infante & Gorden, 1985), siblings emerge less satisfied from interactions with a verbally aggressive sibling (Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997), and college students learn less from verbally aggressive professors (Myers & Knox, 2000). For the most part, people do not appreciate receiving a verbally aggressive message and will do whatever it takes to avoid spending time with a verbally aggressive person.

Now that we have examined four communication traits likely to be exhibited by group members, let's examine three prevalent personality traits exhibited by group members as well.



In your work group, what topics of discussion lead group members to engage in verbal aggressiveness? In what situations is a group member's use of verbal aggressiveness justified?

## Personality Traits

Similar to communication traits, a person can possess numerous personality traits (Davies, 1994). In this section, we will focus on three personality traits—Machiavellianism, self-monitoring, and self-esteem—known to influence group member communication.

### *Machiavellianism*

**Machiavellianism**, a concept based on the 16th-century writings of Niccolò Machiavelli who offered advice on how to influence people and exert power over others, refers to an individual's ability to manipulate a situation in order to



**Photo 3.3** A group member high in self-monitoring pays attention to her behavior in a group setting.

Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Yuri\_Arcurs.

influence and control it for his own purposes (Davies, 1994). People high in Machiavellianism (high Machs) not only manipulate and persuade other people more than people low in Machiavellianism (low Machs); they often defeat others' persuasions (Christie & Geis, 1970). People high in this personality trait will go to great lengths to reach success. Generally, high Machs view interactions as social competitions. These individuals often are ideologically neutral, involve little emotion in their interpersonal relationships, and will shift commitment when doing so promotes personal gain (Mudrack & Mason, 1995).

### Self-Monitoring

**Self-monitoring** is the extent to which a person pays attention to the social requirements of a situation and, striving for appropriateness and effectiveness, adapts her verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Snyder, 1987). Although most people modify their communication at one time or another depending on the context, some people modify their behaviors much more regularly. High self-monitors, for example, pay close attention to others' reactions to them and control how they present themselves in social interactions. Low self-monitors, on the other hand, concern

themselves less with how others react to them and typically express what they think and feel regardless of the communicative situation (Kent & Moss, 1990).

Communication scholar John Daly (2002) offered two general findings about the research conducted on self-monitoring. First, high self-monitors are more conversationally sensitive and flexible in their behaviors than low self-monitors. Adapting their behavior allows high self-monitors, considered helpful by their peers (Flynn, Reagans, Amanatullah, & Ames, 2006), to be more interpersonally effective. Second, low self-monitors behave more consistently and maintain more trusting friendships than high self-monitors. Low self-monitors communicate more honestly, often not worrying about the impression they make on other people.

### *Self-Esteem*

**Self-esteem** describes a person's overall self-worth. People with high self-esteem feel good about and praise themselves whereas people with low self-esteem do not. Self-esteem cannot be given or appointed to someone. Although we can commend our friends and their accomplishments, individuals must recognize their level of self-esteem. At the same time, an individual's perception of self usually is based on his social interactions and conversations with others (Glauser, 1984), and thus, not surprisingly, individuals with high self-esteem feel more comfortable and confident with whom they interact compared to individuals with low self-esteem.

## Communication and Personality Traits in the Small Group

So how do these communication and personality traits surface in the small group? Based on the research conducted to date, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Group members who are unwilling to communicate interact less (Burgoon, 1977). At the same time, apprehensive group members avoid expressing disagreement with each other and more likely will make irrelevant comments (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Highly apprehensive members also attend fewer group meetings and report less group cohesiveness (C. M. Anderson & Martin, 1995). Additionally, these members experience more difficulty attempting to socialize with group members and becoming assimilated into the group when it first forms. Highly apprehensive members also less likely will be selected by their group members as the leader than moderately and minimally apprehensive

members (Limon & LaFrance, 2005), and highly apprehensive members rate lower in social and task attractiveness than minimally apprehensive members (Hawkins & Stewart, 1991).

2. A link exists between a group member's communication apprehension and communicator style in the small group. Thomas Porter (1982) found that group members judge highly communication-apprehensive individuals as less relaxed and dominant than individuals with low communication apprehension.

3. Highly argumentative group members prove likelier than minimally argumentative members to be rated more influential in the group (Shultz, 1982) and to be nominated as the group leader (Limon & LaFrance, 2005; Shultz, 1982). Highly argumentative members also report greater satisfaction with their group experiences and a greater level of cohesiveness with their groups (C. M. Anderson & Martin, 1999). Conversely, highly verbally aggressive members report lower satisfaction, lower levels of group consensus, and lower levels of cohesiveness than less verbally aggressive members (C. M. Anderson & Martin, 1999).

4. Furthermore, highly argumentative group members rate themselves higher on several personality traits than minimally argumentative group members. Argumentativeness researchers Nancy and Stephen Schullery (2002)

reported that self-perceived argumentativeness correlates positively with being a reliable worker, exhibiting leadership, engaging effectively in brainstorming, and enjoying small group work. At the same time, group members high in argumentativeness report that they are neither shy nor want to avoid conflict.



Identify your level of communication apprehension, your communicator style cluster, your level of argumentativeness, and your level of verbal aggressiveness. How do these four communication traits affect your participation in your work group? How do these four communication traits affect your attitude toward your work group?

5. A group member's level of Machiavellianism influences group interaction (Bochner & Bochner, 1972). Although high Machs participate frequently in group interaction (Bochner, DiSalvo, & Jonas, 1975), they disagree more often than low Machs (Bochner & Bochner, 1972). High Machs often communicate very skillfully and serve several task-related functions, such as asking questions, offering suggestions, and giving directions (Hacker & Gaitz, 1970). Incidentally, if their own interests coincide with the best interests of the group, the group may benefit from high Machs' behavior. However, high Machs almost always put their self-interests ahead of the group's.

6. High self-monitors are more active, talkative, and likely to emerge as leaders than low self-monitors (Ellis, Adamson, Deszca, & Cawsey, 1988; Ellis & Cronshaw, 1992), perhaps because low self-monitors more often present their true selves when

interacting in groups. High self-monitors, on the contrary, often display the part of themselves that is socially expected by members and effective in accomplishing the group's task. They also tend to speak faster than low self-monitors (Dabbs, Evans, Hopper, & Purvis, 1980), conform more than low self-monitors in group situations (Rarick, Soldow, & Geizer, 1976), and are viewed by group members as providing a valuable contribution to the group process (Kent & Moss, 1990).

7. A group member with low self-esteem is more susceptible to group member influence. In a group setting, members with low self-esteem will comply or agree with other members instead of disagreeing or presenting a dissenting voice. Chances are, if they disagree, they will downplay their disagreement to the group, hoping to avoid projecting a negative image (Cohen & Sheposh, 1977). Moreover, members with low self-esteem less likely will assume a leadership role in groups (Kwal & Fleshler, 1975), which may explain why members with low self-esteem rate the group experience less favorably than members with high self-esteem (Crocker & Schwartz, 1985).

## A Final Note About Small Group Member Traits

Paraphrasing L. R. Anderson (1978), Joann Keyton and Lawrence Frey (2002) asserted that “groups often are only as good as the members that make them up” (p. 99). This statement underscores the importance of recognizing a group member's communication and personality traits' impact on a group. Developing an understanding of the influence of members' communication and personality traits helps explain not only the manner in which members communicate but also members' predispositions toward group work (Keyton & Frey, 2002); the emergence of such outcomes as cohesion, consensus, and satisfaction (C. M. Anderson & Martin, 1999); and the compatibility of group members. More importantly, developing an understanding of communication and personality traits influences the impressions you make about group members. In the case study, had he realized that James was exhibiting the characteristics of a person high in communication apprehension, Abdul likely would have perceived James more favorably, which ultimately would exert a positive influence on future group meetings.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored the communication and personality traits possessed by group members. In doing so, we defined the term *trait* and differentiated between a communication trait and a personality trait. We then examined four prevalent

communication traits and three prevalent personality traits. Finally, we summarized the research conducted on these communication and personality traits in the small group. As you read the next chapter, consider how your own communication and personality traits reflect the diversity represented by small group members.

## Discussion Questions

1. Refer to the case study presented at the beginning of the chapter. For each group member (i.e., Abdul, James, Vinnie, and Sachiko), identify a communication trait from this chapter that each member displays.
2. Suppose a group member feels apprehensive about communicating in your classroom group. What can the group do to make the member more comfortable? Compile a list of recommendations your group can implement.
3. Both argumentativeness, a constructive trait, and verbal aggressiveness, a destructive trait, are considered aggressive communication traits. In what group situations would argumentativeness be considered destructive? In what group situations would verbal aggressiveness be considered constructive?
4. Chapter 9 will discuss the characteristics of effective leadership. Based on your experience, which communication and personality traits do you associate with strong leadership? Which communication and personality traits do you associate with weak leadership?
5. How are a group member's communication and personality traits conveyed when working in a virtual group? To what extent does technology enhance or restrict the impressions group members make about each other in terms of their communication and personality traits?

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