

Fundamentals of  
**Organizational  
Communication**

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UPDATED NINTH EDITION



Pamela S. Shockley-Zalabak

# Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

Knowledge, Sensitivity, Skills, Values

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Knowledge, Sensitivity, Skills, Values

UPDATED NINTH EDITION

**Pamela S. Shockley-Zalabak**

*University of Colorado*

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# Preface

We are in a turbulent time with rapid change in the institutions and organizations with which we are most familiar. *Fundamentals of Organizational Communication: Knowledge, Sensitivity, Skills, Values* was written to help readers experience twenty-first-century organizational challenges within the context of learning about communication and organizations.

The ninth edition of this book presents the concepts of organizational communication within a unique competency-based approach that incorporates personal knowledge, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, and ethical values. It blends theory, practice, and analysis with an emphasis on knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values.

Why a competency-based approach? The answer is simple: organizing material by competency components is academically relevant, individually practical, and important to organizations. Favorable responses to earlier editions from both students and faculty support the competency-based mix of theory and application. In addition, studies in the United States and internationally describe both human and technological communication as the keys to excellence in the twenty-first century. Numerous employer surveys have found that accurately processing large volumes of information within organizations, although necessary, is not sufficient for excellence; employers need individuals who take personal responsibility for building relationships that contribute to trust, quality communication, innovation, and change.

## New to This Edition

The changes in the ninth edition of *Fundamentals of Organizational Communication* directly address the rapid changes in the field and provide students with the most current information available from which to make both academic and professional choices. A brief overview of some of the most important changes to the ninth edition includes:

### Knowledge

Theoretical concepts important to the study of organizational communication are presented so that students can develop personal knowledge. Knowledge competencies are what we come to know about the theory and principles of a particular field of study, in this case organizational communication. Knowledge competencies support sensitivity in organizational life, guide our development of skills, and assist us in understanding the application

of ethical standards and our personal values in organizational settings.

### Sensitivity

The sensitivity component in the competency framework refers to our ability to sense or become aware of a variety of organizational meanings and feelings. It is related to our ability and willingness to understand what others are feeling and doing. To help students develop the sensitivity competency, this book encourages them to study and analyze various roles and relationships within organizations.

### Skills

The skills component of the framework focuses on developing important analytical capabilities as well as the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of settings. It is designed to help students develop both initiating and receiving communication skills. Key organizational communication skills are identified, and analysis and practice opportunities appropriate for each are provided.

### Values

The values component in the competency framework is key to the integration of knowledge, sensitivity, and skills. To understand the realities of organizational life, we must first examine how individual and organizational values or ethics can shape organizational communication behavior. Students develop values and ethics through case studies that present ethical dilemmas and value issues in organizational settings. We adopt different value positions and ethical perspectives to analyze cases, recommend courses of action, and predict outcomes.

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- **Instructor’s Manual**—includes a chapter description, in-class discussion and application-based questions, a research assignment for each chapter, and a compilation of cases and essays to illustrate the diversity in issues within the field of organizational communication
- **Test Bank**—includes additional questions beyond the REVEL in multiple-choice and open-ended—short and essay response—formats.
- **MyTest**—an electronic format of the Test Bank to customize in-class tests or quizzes. Visit: <http://www.pearsonhighered.com/mytest>.

# Acknowledgments

I wrote this book for four primary reasons: my experiences with students who appreciate the importance of the study of organizational communication, my research interests in organizational communication, my years of organizational experience in both the private and public sectors, and my fundamental belief that organizations and the discipline of organizational communication must undergo significant change as the world around us changes. When taken together, these experiences and beliefs have been invaluable to me in relating theory to practice and in projecting competency needs for the future.

I am grateful for the help and support of many individuals in the development of this manuscript. My colleagues from the Aspen Engaged Scholars Conference along with my colleagues in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (Sherry Morreale, Lauren Brengarth, and Mike Hackman), have stimulated my thinking. I also want to thank the many special students at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, who reviewed and critiqued most of the exercises and cases contained in the text.

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On a personal note, I wrote this book with the continuing guidance, love, and support of my family. My father and mother, Jim and Leatha Shockley, provided the foundation for a special pursuit of learning. Without my husband, Charles, the professional years simply would not have occurred. His continuous love and encouragement made all dreams possible. Our daughter and granddaughter, Yvonne and Carissa, continue in his light.

This book was written for students who want to change and improve organizations and themselves, who are willing to risk excellence, and who love engaging in human communication. Therefore, to students (past, present, and future) and to my family (Charles, Yvonne, Carissa, Mom, and Dad), I dedicate this book.



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# Chapter 1

# Organizational Communication

## A Competency-Based Approach



### Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Examine the factors that have changed organizations and the way people work.
- 1.2 Recognize communication to be fundamental to the process of organizing.
- 1.3 Describe communication in the information-rich world.
- 1.4 Recognize communication as a key to organizational excellence.
- 1.5 Restate a contemporary “good communicator” theme.
- 1.6 Report communication competency as a personal and organizational need.
- 1.7 Describe the human communication process.
- 1.8 Develop awareness of our personal communication competencies.
- 1.9 Distinguish among interpersonal, small-group, and organizational communication.
- 1.10 Identify descriptions of organizations.
- 1.11 Survey definitions of organizational communication.
- 1.12 Assess personal development needs.

#### Developing Competencies Through...

<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	Describing communication in the information-rich world Defining and describing communication competency Defining and describing the human communication process Identifying descriptions of organizations Surveying definitions of organizational communication
<b>SENSITIVITY</b>	Understanding communication as a key to organizational excellence Developing awareness of our personal communication competencies Understanding human communication as attempting to create shared realities, shared meanings Distinguishing among interpersonal, small-group, and organizational communication

<b>SKILLS</b>	Assessing personal development needs Practicing analysis capabilities
<b>VALUES</b>	Understanding communication competency as a personal and organizational need Clarifying a contemporary “good communicator” theme Understanding communication as fundamental to the process of organizing Evaluating communication for ethics and effectiveness

## 1.1: The Changing Nature of Organizations and Work

### 1.1 Examine the factors that have changed organizations and the way people work

We are in one of the more turbulent periods in history. This statement is not profound but is real nevertheless. Our twenty-first-century world is more complex, and the knowledge we bring to bear on our problems often adds to confusion and disagreement. We have unprecedented opportunities and unprecedented problems. Most of us seek a firm direction that is outmoded. Uncertainty and change have become the norm. We need new thinking, new criticisms, new knowledge, new approaches, and new understandings. Creativity and innovation are more important than ever.

Nowhere is the current turbulence more evident than in contemporary organizations. Increased economic pressures, globalization, rapidly diversifying employee and customer bases, changing technology, societal needs, an increasing awareness of organizational relationships to society in general, and a host of other factors contribute to new organization types, new relationships between organizations and employees, and a growing acknowledgment of the complexity of all organizational life. The virtual organization, e-commerce, high-performing teams, contract employment, increased contact with a culturally diverse world, and home-based work are but a few of the changes with impacts on interpersonal relationships, group interactions, management and leadership, personal and professional ethics, time management, and non-work life.

What many have called the old social contract—mutual loyalty and support between employees and their employers—has been replaced by frequent shifts from one employer to another, increased global competition, downsizing in workforces, part-time employment, flatter organizations, and a generally changing relationship between management and workers. Critics of the changing nature of our work lives call for increased workplace democracy, whereas its advocates defend the changes as necessary for survival.

## 1.2: Challenges for Individuals and Organizations

### 1.2 Recognize communication to be fundamental to the process of organizing

The environments individuals and organizations encounter are complex, fragile, turbulent, and uncertain. The opportunities for innovation and change are enormous. J. F. Rischard (2002) describes the challenges individuals and organizations face as problems of sharing our planet, our humanity, and a global rule book. Rischard identifies global warming, biodiversity, deforestation, poverty, education, the digital divide, e-commerce rules, international labor and migration rules, the global financial architecture, and several other problems as issues so pressing they must be addressed in the next twenty years by individuals and organizations including for-profit, not-for-profit, governmental, and educational institutions. War, terrorism, global warming, and

accelerating rates of change add to what appears to be a growing list. Individuals and organizations experience increasingly diverse environments characterized by age, gender, race, social class, and cultural differences. For individuals the requirement to continually learn and build new competencies has never been greater. Individuals continually face challenges between complex organization requirements and personal and family life. Individuals and organizations are asked to engage these challenges and differences to create opportunities, generate innovation, and contribute to productive change.

## 1.3: The Communications Era

### 1.3 Describe communication in the information-rich world

Regardless of the position taken about the changing nature of organizations and work, few disagree the communications era surrounds us. We live, work, and play in complex communications environments. Sophisticated communications technologies have changed the way we do everything. The rapid development and use of communications technologies have contributed to individuals, organizations, and the entire world becoming more interconnected than at any previous point in human history.

All of us are experiencing a unique time in history with two unprecedented shifts—globalization and the nature of innovation—driving changes impacting all aspects of our lives. Innovation can occur anywhere, and participation in the creation of new products and processes is no longer limited to superpowers and highly developed countries. The United States of America, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom have all seen white-collar jobs move to countries such as India, China, and Russia. Millions of routine jobs have disappeared, while new and more stimulating jobs requiring communications expertise are created. With more than half of America's workforce and gross national product in knowledge industries, virtually all agree we are in a postindustrial **information society** moving to a **conceptual age**. Daniel Pink (2005), who describes the shift from the information to the conceptual age, suggests, "The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people—artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers—will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys." Thomas Friedman (2006) believes "we are now connecting all the knowledge centers on the planet together into a single global network, which—if politics and terrorism do not get in the way—could usher in an amazing era of prosperity, innovation, and collaboration, by companies, communities, and individuals."

As an individual you are likely to spend most of your working life employed in a "knowledge/information" or "conceptual" job. You are more likely to create, process, or distribute information than you are to be directly involved in the production of goods. There is a greater need for salespeople, teachers, lawyers, financial analysts, media producers, bankers, consultants, scientists, engineers, doctors, architects, writers, information managers, editors, and social workers and a decreased need for manufacturing assembly workers, service support workers, miners, toolmakers, machinists, builders, and welders.

One of the most important characteristics of the "communications" era is the rapid change associated with mass production of information, change requiring us all to be constantly involved in the learning of new activities and processes. Most of us have already experienced rapid change brought about by new technologies. For example, although checks can still be written by hand, many of us pay our bills online or with plastic cards and use computer terminals to deposit money in or withdraw money from our bank accounts. We can still go to the movies, or we can bring movies to our homes through discs, satellites, and Internet connections. We can write letters and

memos to send through “regular” mail, or we can use sophisticated electronic systems to send and receive all types of correspondence and files rapidly. We use our cellular phones for talking with others but also as our Web connections, cameras (both still and video), instant messaging devices, calculators, clocks, e-mail processors, televisions, and a host of other functions. Social networking of all types increasingly is prevalent in both our personal and organizational environments.

Fiber-optic connections, wireless networks, and global telecommunications and computer networks have literally changed the ways in which we do research, changed those with whom we can stay in constant contact, and altered notions of time and space. We are connected daily with both close friends and strangers. Most students reading this book are in traditional classrooms with “live” instructors. For some students now, and for more in the future, however, “live” means that the instructor is located at a remote site equipped with audio, video, and computer interconnects supported by e-books. *Convergence* is the term of the day, with computing, wireless technologies, and more traditional media such as television converging into integrated tools for work, school, family, and leisure environments.

We have so much information that, for individuals and organizations, the challenge is how to deal with our information alternatives. This daily increase in information (based on innovations in communications and computer technology) brings with it rapid change in activities, processes, and products.

Workers in the communications era of microelectronics, computers, and telecommunications have an abundance of information for decision making and a growing concern for information overload. Research suggests virtually all knowledge workers use e-mail and voicemail, with use of mobile phones, conference calls, corporate intranets, IM/text messaging, corporate Web sites, information portals, and corporate extranets commonplace. Social media have become a cultural phenomenon in all aspects of our lives. We are connected around the clock as work and personal time merge for many. We can routinely communicate across both geography and organizational levels. It is not unusual, for example, for employees of an organization in Boston to interact with their counterparts in Los Angeles, whom they have never met, while both groups prepare a portion of a single report or recommendation. And for a growing number of individuals, this report can be generated without ever leaving their homes as they “telecommute” from automated home workstations to offices around the globe.

The complexity of all organizational life and the rapid increase in communications technologies place increasing demands on our individual communication abilities. These demands are best met with the perspective that becoming and staying competent is an ongoing process requiring lifelong learning.

## 1.4: Communication: The Key to Organizational Excellence

### 1.4 Recognize communication as a key to organizational excellence

In this complex and information-rich conceptual society, the key to **organizational excellence** is communication excellence. Communication systems within organizations—both human and technological—are responsible for solving increasingly complex problems creatively. People using the machines of the communications era must coordinate large volumes of information for the performance of new and dynamic tasks. There is widespread recognition, however, that excellence in organizational problem solving is more than the efficient management of large volumes of facts. Organizational excellence stems from the dedicated commitment of people, people who are motivated to work together and who share similar values and visions about the results of their efforts.

Viewing communications as the key to organizational excellence is not new. As early as 1938, Chester Barnard, in his now-famous work *The Functions of the Executive*, described as a primary responsibility of executives the development and maintenance of a system of communication. Research since then has linked organizational communication to managerial effectiveness, the integration of work units across organizational levels, characteristics of effective supervision, job and communication satisfaction, innovation, adaptability, creativity, and overall organizational effectiveness and performance. In fact, numerous scholars have gone as far as to suggest that organizations are essentially complex communication processes that create and change events. For both the industrial society of the past and the information and conceptual societies of today and tomorrow, there is broad agreement about the centrality of organizational communication and that organizational communication plays a significant part in contributing to or detracting from organizational excellence.

With this emphasis on the complex, fast-paced information conceptual society and the importance of human communication, questions arise concerning what skills and abilities organizations need from their future employees. How should individuals prepare themselves for the information responsibilities and opportunities that almost inevitably will be a part of the future? What does it take to contribute to organizational communication excellence?

Put simply, organizations of today and tomorrow need competent communicators at all organizational levels. With more complex decisions, rapid change, more information, and less certainty about what the decisions should be, excellence in a conceptual world depends on the abilities, commitment, and creativity of all organizational members. As a result, students, communication teachers and researchers, and active organizational members must work together to understand what contributes to organizational communication competency and how best to develop personal potential. It is our collective expertise that will detract from or contribute to excellence.

## 1.5: Excellence in Communication: Communication Competency

### 1.5 Restate a contemporary “good communicator” theme

Quintilian, an early Latin rhetorician, is credited with introducing the ideal of the “good man speaking well,” an ideal that is not as far removed from contemporary concepts of organizational communication competency as history might suggest. In fact, Michael Hackman and Craig Johnson (2004) identified a contemporary “good communicator” theme when reviewing research from personnel administrators throughout the United States of America. Today’s organizations need people who can speak well, listen, write, persuade others, demonstrate interpersonal skills, gather information, and exhibit small-group problem-solving expertise. In other words, organizations in our complex and turbulent world need flexible and creative people who have diverse and well-developed communication abilities. Yet how do we determine if we are competent organizational communicators? Who decides? On what do we base our conclusions?

Researchers differ in how they define **communication competency**. Some believe that a person is competent if he or she knows what is appropriate in a specific situation, whether or not that behavior actually occurs. A student, for example, who realizes that class participation is required for a high grade may choose not to participate, yet the student can be considered competent because of the knowledge or awareness of the appropriate behavior. Other researchers extend the competency

concept beyond knowledge of appropriate behaviors to include actual language performance and the achievement of interpersonal goals. The student, from this perspective, must not only recognize appropriate participation behaviors but also participate so as to demonstrate communication competency.

Fred Jablin and Patricia Sias (2001), in their comprehensive discussion of communication competency, suggested that the concept of communication competency is best understood by an ecological model that revolves around four systems:

### ⊗ **Microsystem**

The microsystem, which contains the developing organizational member and other persons in the immediate work environment (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, and clients)

### ⊗ **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem, which represents the interrelations among various microsystems (e.g., what individuals learn in their project teams may affect their competence in the functional work groups in which they are members)

### ⊗ **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem, which does not represent the immediate context in which an individual works, but does impinge on him or her (i.e., major divisions of the organization and the organization itself as a whole)

### ⊗ **Exosystem**

The exosystem, which represents the overarching cultural belief system, forms of knowledge, social, technological, and political ideologies

In brief, an ecological perspective emphasizes system embeddedness. That is, the actions of one element of the system affect the other elements.

Jablin and Sias specifically described how globalization and technology have changed forever notions of what is a competent communicator. It is fair to conclude that they have expanded the previous notions of communication competency to extend to groups and to the organization as a whole within its broad environment. Sherry Morreale (2009) suggests linkage between communication competence and ethics. Specifically, Morreale identifies issues of competence related to pursuing self-interest versus the interest of others, to engaging in information sharing versus manipulation, and to recognizing the long-term effects of communication across time and diverse relationships.

## 1.5.1: Communication Competency for the Organizational Setting

Stephen Littlejohn and David Jabusch (1982) have proposed a particularly useful definition of communication competency for the organizational setting. They suggest that

communication competency is “the ability and willingness of an individual to participate responsibly in a transaction in such a way as to maximize the outcomes of shared meanings.” This definition requires not only knowledge of appropriate behaviors but also motivation to engage in communication that results in mutual understanding. In other words, communication competency involves our personal willingness and ability to communicate so that our meanings are understood and we understand the meanings of others. Finally, this definition can be applied to the group and macro-organizational levels so important in the ecological model proposed by Jablin and Sias. Regardless of differences in perspectives, organizational communication competency relates to message encoding and decoding abilities, the process of communication initiation and consumption.

When we begin to think about our personal communication competency, we quickly realize that we form impressions of our own competency while making evaluations about the competency of others. We try to decide what is appropriate for us as well as for others, and we determine whether that behavior is effective in a particular circumstance. In other words, my impression of my own competency and the competency of others is related to my evaluation of whether we exhibited the “right” behaviors and achieved “desirable” results in a particular situation. Determining what is “right” and “desirable” is not always easy, however. Think for a moment about your personal experiences. Have you ever been in a situation where others thought you did a good job although you were disappointed in yourself? Who was right? Were you competent or incompetent? Can both be correct?

Earlier we said that organizational excellence depends on the communication competencies of all organizational members. Specifically, we described the need for creative problem solving among diverse groups of people who often share little common information. With this emphasis on communication and technology, the real question becomes what individuals should do to prepare themselves to meet their future communication needs. In other words, how do we develop and evaluate our communication competencies?

Our answer begins by returning to the Littlejohn and Jabusch approach to communication competency. Littlejohn and Jabusch (1982) contend competency arises out of four basic components: process understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, and ethical responsibility. Process understanding refers to the cognitive ability to understand the dynamics of the communication event. Interpersonal sensitivity is the ability to perceive feelings and meanings. Communication skills are the ability to develop and interpret message strategies in specific situations. The ethical component of competency is the attitudinal set that governs concern for the well-being of all participants in taking responsibility for communication outcomes. Finally, Littlejohn and Jabusch believe that competence comes from the interaction of three primary elements: theory, practice, and analysis. When applied to the organizational setting, the Littlejohn and Jabusch approach can be modified and expanded to include the competency components this book seeks to develop: knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values.

## 1.6: Organizational Communication: A Competency-Based Approach

### 1.6 Report communication competency as a personal and organizational need

This book is designed to help you develop communication competencies for effective organizational communication. The goal of the book is to provide theory, practice, and analysis opportunities that contribute to knowledge, sensitivity, skills, and values important for organizational excellence.



**KNOWLEDGE:** the ability to understand the organizational communication environment. Knowledge competencies are what we come to know about a particular field. Knowledge is the learning of theory and principles. Knowledge competencies are fundamental to support our sensitivity to organizational life, to guide our skill development, and to assist us in understanding the application of ethical standards and our personal values in a variety of organizational settings. **Knowledge competency** develops through the exploration of the interactive process nature of human communication. We examine what organizational communication is and the major theoretical approaches for its study. We explore the roles of individuals in organizations and examine communication implications of major organizational theories. Finally, we discuss vital organizational subjects such as conflict, leadership, and strategic communication.

**SENSITIVITY:** the ability to sense accurately organizational meanings and feelings. It is related to our ability and willingness to understand what others feel and do. **Sensitivity competency** develops through the examination of our personal “theories-in-use” about communication and organizations. We assess individual preferences for leadership and conflict, as well as the impact of personal differences and similarities within organizational settings. We place emphasis on how we come to understand our complex organizational environments.

**SKILLS:** the ability to analyze organizational situations accurately and to initiate and consume organizational messages effectively. The skills competency focuses on developing important analytical capabilities as well as the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of settings. **Skills competency** develops through analysis and practice opportunities. Specifically, analytical skills develop by applying knowledge and sensitivity to case studies and individual experiences. We also present and practice problem-solving and conflict-management skills.

**VALUES:** the importance of taking personal responsibility for effective communication, thereby contributing to organizational excellence. **Values competency** develops through discussion of personal responsibility for participation in organizational communication. We examine ethical dilemmas relating to organizational communication and the importance of values to organizational culture. Finally, we use case studies to illustrate ethical and value issues common in organizations.

## 1.6.1: Individuals Communicating in the Organization

### The “What Business Is This of Ours?” Case

The following case describes a problem at Quality Engineering, a medium-sized company located in Denver, Colorado. The case is based on a real situation at Quality, although the name of the supplier in question has been changed. You will use this case to think about individuals communicating and to begin to understand the concept of organizational communication.

John and Mary were the only two buyers in the purchasing department of Quality Engineering. Both had been with the company for several years and were experienced in handling purchases for the manufacturing, research, finance, and marketing areas of Quality. Mary typically handled purchases for the manufacturing and research areas, and John was the principal buyer for the rest of the organization. At times their individual workloads required

they cross departments and help each other. Their boss, Mike Anderson, the accountant for Quality, believed they were the best purchasing team with whom he had ever worked. He was proud of their efforts and willingness to cooperate with each other. He frequently commented to Quality management that John and Mary made money for the company by getting the best possible prices for goods and services.

Mike was surprised and concerned to overhear John and Mary in a heated discussion.

**JOHN:** I can't believe you are still using Anderson Printing as one of our suppliers. I told you last month that their last two orders for my groups were late and part of the printing had to be sent back because of errors. I told them then that I wouldn't accept any more of their bids on our jobs. It makes me look like a fool when I hear from them that you are still ordering their products for manufacturing and research. How can we enforce good quality from our suppliers if we don't present a united front?

**MARY:** Just a minute. Anderson Printing has been one of our good suppliers for over ten years. I know we have had some problems with them in the past year but I don't think we should drop them flat. They have pulled us out of a lot of jams when we needed printing in a big hurry. I never agreed to drop them from our supplier list. You just told them they were gone and expected me to support your decision. You should have talked to me about it first. I don't care if you think you looked like a fool. We are in this together and need to make those types of decisions as a team.

**JOHN:** I'll admit we should have talked about it, but Anderson made me so mad on that last deal that I just told them they were through. I expected you to support me. We both want what is best for Quality. Our reputations are good because we always get the company the best products for the lowest price. I would have supported you.

**MARY:** Yes, I suspect you would have, but John, you can't lose your temper like that. We need to work together on these decisions. You and I can usually work out a solution when we try hard enough. I don't want to drop any supplier on the spur of the moment, especially when we may have trouble replacing them. John, sometimes I think we have worked together for so long that we take each other for granted. We are friends and I want it to remain that way, but that shouldn't stop us from doing business with each other as true professionals.

**JOHN:** Wait a minute. Are you saying that I don't act like a professional?

**MARY:** No, see what I mean? You get mad when I even suggest we might improve the way we do things.

**JOHN:** Well, I just think friends should support each other. I know I may not have handled the Anderson thing just right, but as my friend I expected more support from you.

**MARY:** Oh, John, there you go again!

## WRITING PROMPT

Are John and Mary engaged in interpersonal or organizational communication, or both? Does the setting make the difference?

► The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit