Hello and welcome to your first audio lecture. This is your week two podcast, part one. I’m Michele Foss-Snowden, your professor, and I’m glad to have you here today.

Before we jump right in to the course material for this week, I’d like to begin with a little question, something to get our brains working. I’ll ask you several questions like this over the course of the semester, and this is our first. So, how would you respond if offered a magical brain pill, a pill that would, if you took it, make you 10% more intelligent than you were before you took the pill. The only side effect to this wonder drug would be that everyone else in the world would see you as 20% less intelligent than you previously were. You would be able to do tasks that you previously could not have done and understand concepts that were previously beyond your reach, but all of your friends and family would wonder what happened to you. This effect would not wear off after time...once you took the pill, there would be no going back.

For me, the question is a chewy one. I think you have to consider both sides of it: how would I feel about being smarter than I am, and how would I feel about being perceived as less intelligent.

If I take the pill, I will be 10% smarter. At first, you might think, “Who wouldn’t want to be smarter?” I’ve worked hard to be at my current level of intelligence. I think people are born with a certain amount of potential, and then you have to work hard, and sink your teeth into the educational opportunities you’re given and that you earn and exercise your brain to really develop your intelligence. But I also believe in the idea of emotional intelligence, which became a popular term in the mid 1990s. Emotional intelligence generally refers to a person’s self-awareness, or character, or ability to manage one’s emotions in daily tasks and challenges. If you’ve ever seen an episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, then you might be familiar with the character Data. Data is an android, or a robot, and one of his defining characteristics is that he has the mind of a computer, but he doesn’t understand sarcastic humor, for example, or why one would bluff during a poker game. It could be said that Data lacks emotional intelligence.

If I could take a pill that would increase my quote/unquote “book smarts” or traditional intelligence, I think that would be nice, but I’m actually satisfied with where I am. I worked hard for it, and I’m still working. I’ve enjoyed the journey of developing my intelligence, and I’m not sure I would be comfortable with a “quick fix.” You’ve surely heard someone say that the “journey is the destination” – I feel the same way about my education. Now, if the pill would increase my emotional intelligence, I might be more torn. I would really be drawn to the possibility of being less awkward in uncomfortable situations or less likely to cry or laugh in inappropriate moments. If we assume that the increase in intelligence would include an increase in emotional intelligence, I think I would, at least at first, be inclined to take the pill.
But let’s discuss the second half of the equation, the drawbacks. It’s this side of the situation that made me think the question would be appropriate for a class in business presentational speaking. Success in my business, education, depends on my ability to convince people that I know what I’m doing. The people I work with, my colleagues, would not have hired me if I they thought I was 20% less intelligent than I am. Even if I somehow convinced them that I was smart enough to be a professor, my lowered intelligence would probably not go over so well with you, the students. You might still take my class, but my credibility (or my ethos) would be damaged, and I would certainly be less effective as a communicator. I think the same is true for the industry you might have in your future. You would be less able to make the sale, and more aware of the tragedy. You would be less likely to get the promotion and bitterly conscious of how much better you are than the person who did get the promotion. In all business or organizational presentations, your image or credibility or sparkle is critical. We’ve all seen examples: it’s not how smart you are, it’s how smart your employees or your co-workers or your clients THINK you are.

You might be thinking, “Well, if I was 10% more intelligent, then I could figure out a way to negate that 20% dip in perception of my intelligence.” Good for you, smarty pants...you are using critical thinking skills to find an out. There is no out...it’s just an interesting philosophical question that basically boils down to this: do you want to be smarter or seem smarter. When the dust settles on this debate, I think I would side with the people who would NOT take the pill. I’m satisfied if people think I’m as smart as I am.

Chuck Klosterman, the author who first posed this question, brings up an interesting side note here. He says we shouldn’t worry as much about the people who are intelligent but seem not to be, those who took the proverbial pill. We should worry about the reverse: the people who seem intelligent but are only pretending.

I hope you enjoyed this question, this chance to work on developing your own intelligence without taking any pills. The question is actually relevant to our topic of the week: introducing communication in the organization. This week’s podcasts will be broken up into two parts after this one: the first will cover some basic concepts that we’ll be referring to all semester, including the importance of communication, and the process of communication. The second will cover our working definition of communication and the building blocks or elements of communication, and I’ll tell you a little story from my past that will hopefully illuminate these concepts better than the graphic at the bottom of page 8 in your reader. You might want to grab that book while I talk because I’ll be referring to your assigned chapters quite a bit. So you do that, and meet me back here for section two.

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Welcome back.
Since Presentational Speaking in the Organization, also known as THIS CLASS, is a communication studies course, we should probably begin with communication itself, discussing why we would and should study communication.

When I told my grandmother that I was going to be a communication major in college, she literally started crying. She thought that communication studies was for people who weren’t tough enough for the “real” majors like human biology or political science or economics. As business majors, you should consider my grandmother very proud of all of you. It took years and years to convince my grandmother of the importance of communication and why it deserves and needs to be studied. In case you were wondering, she’s now okay with it.

There are people, especially in this building, who will tell you, much like I told my grandmother, that we study communication because it is in everything, every field, every tree, and into the Starbucks. Is communication essential to who we are, how we are, and what we are? I tend to think so, but again, communication is my chosen field. For you as business students, we can dial it back a little, but only a little. Communication is still ridiculously important to your success in the organization. Cheryl Hamilton, the author of the first chapter of your reader, notes that employers across industry consistently rank communication skills as most important in hiring decisions, and I’m sure that you can think of some moments where communication either saved your skin or caused a less than lovely occasion for you.

There’s really no need to be so future-focused. Communication skills, specifically presentation skills, are important here and now. Your success as a student depends on your ability to present yourself and your thoughts and knowledge in a competent manner. In this course, you will not only learn the skills that you will need, but hopefully you will understand some of the theories behind the answers. In a nutshell, we study communication because it’s important, across majors in all industries, from the entry-level worker to the CEO.

I don’t think I’m telling you anything new here. You already know that communication is important. To illustrate, try to imagine an organization in your mind. It can be anything; it can be your job, your sorority, or the non-profit organization you volunteer with...just pick some kind of organization to help me illustrate this example for you.

Now, try to imagine that organization WITHOUT communication. Ready? Go!

Can’t do it? I know you can’t...it was kind of a trick question. You cannot take communication and make it separate from the organization.

But maybe you really hate trick questions, and you say “No, no, I’ve got it. At my job, there really is no communication! People are always just walking around and not talking to each other.” Not so fast...you are aware that you can communicate without talking, right?
“Okay, so they don’t look at each other either.” If you’re watching a dance concert, and the dancers are not talking, and they are not looking at you, is there no communication happening? Of course there is communication happening! The movements they make, the music they move to, the lighting involved...all contribute to the message that the people in the audience receive. Try again.

“Uh...okay. So every person in the building sits at a cubicle, doesn’t talk, doesn’t move, and doesn’t use the phone or the computer or the break room or anything.” That was a good try, but no. Even if the people in the building are not communicating with each other, by the nature of being there and being human, they are communicating. The answer is: there can be no organization without communication. The two cannot be separated.

It’s probable that the glitch or the sticking point that keeps most people from understanding the importance of communication is that it is easy to think of it as a thing. A thing is not important. My grandmother wanted me to study political science because it is not a thing. Economics is far too complex to be considered a thing, right? So why is it that when I’ve asked people to describe communication, I get answers that are things? If I say, “What is communication?” and you say “It’s a memo”, you’ve just said that communication is a thing. If you say “it’s a conversation”, well that’s still a thing. If you say, “a film”, obviously, that's a thing.

Now, communication occurs within those things that you mention, but it is not, in itself, a thing. It is a process, and I want you to get nice and comfortable with that idea: communication is a process. It begins and ends in different places all the time. Very rarely is communication linear. It is ongoing, and it’s really more like a moving amoeba than an arrow shot from a bow and hitting a target.

Unfortunately, most of the earliest communication studies framed it as linear, and that understanding of communication stuck for a long time. It had four steps: 1) a sender creates 2) a message and sends it through 3) a medium or channel to 4) a receiver. The receiver then becomes the sender and the process, though reversed, follows the same four steps, again in a linear fashion.

Obviously, that’s ridiculous. Current scholars now recognize that it’s silly to think of communication as having a linear trajectory and so we are going to move on from this point in the course with that underlying image of the great communication amoeba informing everything else you’ll learn this semester.

One last thing I’d like you to remember, in addition to the COMS amoeba, is the complete lack of universalism that we’ll use in this class.

Here’s what I mean. What is history? It’s the past, right? It’s everything that has happened up until now. Now, when you take a history class, is that what you learn? Do you get a book that’s fifteen million pages long and learn everything that has ever happened up until now? No, you don’t. You get history that has been packaged for you by a person with a perspective and quite possibly an agenda. You get little H history, not capital H history, which would be the history we just discussed. What’s
more, is it even humanly possible to learn Capital H history? Not at all, right? Not at all.

Let’s play again with truth. Is there anything in your life that you can say is true? Are you a college student? Yes? Is that the truth? Sure it is. Did I see snow in Sacramento a while ago? Yep. Is that true? Yep. But, it’s little t true. Is it humanly possible for me to say that any of these things are capital T true, meaning absolutely, universally, without exception, true, 100% of the time? Not really. It’s possible that I had a dream about snow. I can say what’s true for me, but I can’t really say anything that is true for everyone. I just can’t be sure. There are temporary truths, and individual truths, but there are no absolute truths.

I would love for you to remember this idea as we move on. Language and words are just symbols that we’ve accepted, but they are not universal or absolute. I’m reminded of the movie Mean Girls, and how the character Gretchen kept saying that things she approved of were “fetch” meaning they were nice or good or interesting. Finally, her friends says, “Gretchen, stop trying to make fetch happen. It’s not going to happen.” If those girls were real, and fetch did happen, and you were not a part of their group, you might not have any idea what was going on when Gretchen said, “That is so fetch.”

My point is that with anything we discuss here, you will have to remember the lack of absolutes. One trick you learn might work in one situation, but completely flop in another, due to cultural differences, or timing, or general circumstances. Obviously, the original description of the process of communication was not absolute. It changed. It’s still changing.

Similarly, the definition of communication is not absolute. People disagree. It’s changing, but...we have to start somewhere. Let’s give ourselves a nice foundational definition of communication to work with, and then if you’d like to adjust it to meet your own understanding or experiences, feel free.

But first, I can sense you need a little break. When you come back, we’ll talk definitions.

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Welcome back to your third and final part of the week two lecture. I hope you’re getting the hang of the whole audio lecture thing...it will just get easier and more comfortable as we move through the semester.

I just enjoyed a Diet Pepsi, thank you very much, and now I think we’re ready to talk about the definition of communication, and then I’m sure you’re very eager to hear about my embarrassing story from working retail. Don’t fret, we’ll get there and I promise you, the story will be so fetch. Just kidding.
Hamilton’s definition calls communication (quote) the process of people sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings with each other in commonly understandable ways (end quote). You’ll find that definition on page 7 of your reader, nice and early.

Let’s break it down. She says it’s a process, which is good because I think we’ve come to agree that yes, communication is not a thing, it’s a process. She says that sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings is important, and we can agree that you can share those thoughts ideas and feelings through a variety of methods. Finally, she mentions common understanding, and we’ll talk about that in a moment.

This definition is not going to help us much, though, unless we can break it down even further, and luckily, Hamilton is happy to oblige us.

She gives us twelve elements that are role players in the communication process, and they are sender, receiver, stimulus, motivation, message, encoding, decoding, channel, frame of reference, environment, feedback, and noise. Now, we just discussed how there are no absolutes here, so I would never presume to suggest that these are the only elements involved or that all of these elements play a role in every single communication interaction. My intention here, and Hamilton shares this intention I think, is to discuss some possibilities with you. Don’t you love the wavy gravy path we’re taking? I do. I love it. In your book, you can follow along by turning to page 9, and maybe you’ll love it too.

Person A and Person B are also known as Sender and Receiver or Receiver and Sender. If you imagine that you and I are having a conversation, I am sending and you are receiving, but you are sending and I am receiving at the same time. Show me the conversation, especially between two people who either really like each other or really hate each other, where one person sends, then the other person receives and then that person sends and the first person receives and then back and forth with nothing in the middle. It doesn’t happen that way, but for the sake of clarity, we will call one party the sender and the other party will be the receiver, as long as you understand that in realistic communications, both are both.

A stimulus, using Hamilton’s words, “triggers the desire to communicate” and motivation is what makes you actually do it. If I’m thirsty, I might think to myself, “I want a Diet Pepsi” and my thirst is the stimulus, but there has to be something else that makes me actually go downstairs and get the soda. Maybe there’s a commercial break.

The message is the content, the words, the protein. The protein gets prepared though, right? Even if it’s not cooked, it’s put on a plate. The preparation is encoding. I love how Hamilton uses email as an example. When you compose an email, you have to do more than just write the words. You have to think about how to address the person who will receive the email. Will you write, Hello Dr. Foss-Snowden, or will your email read, “Hey Michele”. Both openings convey the message: “greetings”, but one will convey respect and the other will cause me, as I decode or unpack the message, to be instantly annoyed. You have to be careful
when encoding a message, and you have to try to be understanding when you’re decoding. I’m working on it.

The channel or medium is how the message gets there, and you have choices to make here as well. To keep with our same email example, the student who begins an email to me with “Hey Michele” has underestimated a few factors including the appropriate level of formality. If I receive an email that begins with such informality, I can only assume that it’s not pressing, that it’s not business, or that it’s not important. Email is seen as a less formal medium or channel than a written letter, but more formal than a face-to-face conversation. It’s curious that you probably wouldn’t walk up to me and SAY “hey Michele” and you probably wouldn’t get out some company letterhead and begin with “hey Michele”, but email is this weird etiquette purgatory. Try to use the same manners in one medium as you would in another.

I’ve been thinking lately, that perhaps the problem is one of frame of reference. When I was in college, I would never have dreamed of saying things to my professors that some students have said to me. So, I have a different frame of reference for some of the messages I receive. It should be obvious that frame of reference can become a pretty significant issue in business or organizational communication settings.

Speaking of settings, environment is another factor to consider. The time, place, and surroundings can make or break an interaction. If I get a too-casual email at noon, that’s one thing. If I get it at 3am, I might react differently. You can think of it as context. In one situation, one solution might work just fine. In another situation, the same solution could find you in an appointment with an attorney and the HR people at your job.

Feedback is defined by Hamilton as the verbal and visual response to a message. She says that we have no way of knowing if our messages were received as we intended them without feedback, and I think that’s a good way to separate the idea of feedback from the idea of a new, encoded message (which it basically is). If you keep your sender hat on, feedback is the way you check your message for holes.

If your feedback suggests that there are indeed holes, those holes might have been caused by noise. For example, if you are giving your speech in front of the class, and someone barges in while you’re speaking, that rude individual represents external noise or some kind of distraction in the environment. It’s likely that the latecomer will create some internal noise as well, as you start telling yourself that you lost your place and you weren’t feeling nervous before but now, wait, was that actually a drop of sweat that rolled down your back, and so on. My rule about waiting outside if you come late to class is my effort to reduce the noise in your speaking environment. And...you’re welcome.

Finally, there is one last factor, which is not one of the elements, or factors that Hamilton lists, but she does mention it in her definition, which was, if you’ll
remember, the process of people sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings with each other in commonly understandable ways.

It’s understanding, and it creates an interesting question for us to consider. Do you have to have understanding to have communication? As a matter of fact, are any of these elements absolutely necessary in order for communication to happen, or are any of them disposable or temporary? Perhaps after I walk you through a personal example, you’ll be better able to say.

In another lifetime, when I was in college, I worked at an international fashion company that I won’t name here because I’m still afraid of them and I don’t want them to hunt me down and sue me or otherwise ruin my life. It was summer and I only wanted to work there to get a discount on the clothes. I knew that when school started again, I would want to quit, but I had all intentions of sticking it out and working there as long as I could stand it or until my grades started to suffer.

That moment came sooner than later, as it turns out. I woke up one morning around 10:30, and I was supposed to be at work around noon. On this particular morning, the sun was out and beautiful but it wasn’t hot…it was just nice. School had been in for about a week, it was a Friday, and I could think of about ten million things I would rather do than go to work. I decided to quote/unquote call in sick. I called and of course my manager was the one who answered the phone. I tried to sound my most pitiful, you know, making little coughing noises and sniffing and whatnot. I told her that I would not be coming in because I was very ill, ill enough in fact that I was going to go to the student health center. I told her I was pretty sure that I had pneumonia or bronchitis or something, when in reality, I had a mild case of spring fever in the early fall. She, of course didn’t buy it for a minute, and she told me to make sure to bring her the note from my doctor when I came in for my next shift. She called my bluff. I said, “okay, I’ll do that” and I never stepped foot in that store again. To this day, I have not been back. I’m not proud of how I behaved, but I’m glad that I have an example to discuss with you.

Let’s see how the factors we just discussed appear in my story, and let’s begin with sender. Depending on your perspective, the sender could be my manager or me, which means that the receiver could also be my manager or me, or we were both both. Remember, communication scholars now believe that communication doesn’t begin in one place and then end in another and then start up again.

The stimulus in this situation was that I was supposed to be going to work and I did not want to go. My motivation for instigating the communication was that I didn’t want to lose my job, so I knew I had to call my manager. The difference between these two factors is fairly subtle. The stimulus is more about reasoning whereas the motivation is more about action. Because of the stimulus, I was motivated to act in a certain way.

The basic idea in my message was that I was sick and I would not be coming in to work. I encoded the message in a way that should have told my manager I was sick.
I spoke softly, I tried to sound pitiful, and I inserted little sniffs or coughs in between phrases. I chose words very carefully, trying to be respectful. In terms of decoding, she had likely heard my story before (not from me, but from the hundreds of other college students who had come through those doors before me). She decoded my message as being a load of crap.

Just as I encoded my message to her, she simultaneously encoded her message to me, which was less careful, and far less respectful. I decoded her message and knew that she wasn’t buying it. She was not trying to hide her assessment of my message.

Our medium was a telephone conversation, and that medium was central to my plan. If she could see me with my non-sick looking self, no amount of sniffling could have possibly convinced her that I was really sick. Over the phone, she really had no way of knowing if I was lying.

She knew, though, that I was lying, and part of that has to do with her frame of reference. My frame of reference was that I was barely 20 years old, I was thinking about a career as a lawyer (at the time), and working at this store just wasn’t that important to me. That attitude made me a real jerk and a nightmare employee, and like I said, I’m not proud, but my frame was what it was. Her frame of reference, on the other hand, was that she was the manager of a very successful branch of a very successful company and she trusted me not to blow off my responsibility and then lie about it. It was important to her, and it was not important to me. Our frames of reference did not match.

The environment didn’t help our situation either. I mentioned earlier that I called in about an hour and a half before I was supposed to be there. That gave her next to no time to find someone to cover my shift. The increased stress on her probably added to her attitude with me.

The first moment of relevant feedback in this story comes when she called my bluff and told me to bring a note from the doctor. What’s interesting about feedback, and we’ll study this in greater detail later this semester, but I find it interesting that if someone were to type up a transcript of the conversation, my manager’s feedback would seem pretty normal, even sympathetic. It was her nonverbal feedback, the tone of her voice specifically, that came through loud and clear. She was highly annoyed with me, and I knew it.

Now, I’m sure there were other employees and customers and any number of things at the time I called that needed her attention much more than I did, creating some external noise. I know for a fact that there was noise on my side, but it was only internal. My gut was in knots, and a little voice in my head was telling me to say “I quit” instead of “I’m sick.”

As for understanding, I’m quite sure my manager understood my message, even though what she understood was not at all what I wanted her to understand. I’m also quite sure I understood her message, even though what she SAID and what she meant were two different things. How is it that we shared understanding without or
perhaps in spite of the presence of all of the other communication elements we’ve discussed today? Perhaps it all goes back to those two ideas: the amoeba and the lack of absolutes. I’m going to write to J.K. Rowling and tell her she should bring back Harry Potter and the title of the REAL last book should be Harry Potter, the amoeba, and the lack of absolutes.

Next week we’ll discuss audience adaptation, and how it can completely make or break your presentation.

But before we say farewell for now, I’d like to leave you with another question to consider for next week, courtesy of one of my favorite authors, Chuck Klosterman: Begin with thinking of a certain person, a friend, but not your best friend. This friend, unfortunately, is going to be attacked by a bear. Don’t freak out just yet...your friend will absolutely survive the attack. It’s guaranteed. However, you cannot know the extent of your friend’s injuries. Your friend might have a few scratches, or she might lose a limb. He might recover completely in 24 hours, or his recovery might take years and years of physical therapy.

Now, you magically have the ability to stop the attack. You can save your friend from the bear. But, of course, the ability comes with a price. If you choose to stop the bear, the rain will follow you for the rest of your life. Wherever you go, it will rain. Sometimes it will rain a lot, and sometimes it will only rain a little, but it will never NOT be raining. You aren’t disrupting global weather patterns, so don’t let the other 6 billion people in the world influence your decision. You and only you can basically kiss the sun goodbye. So, do you stop the bear and accept a lifetime of rain or do you let your friend battle it out with Smokey?

So, that’s going to do it for your introduction to communication in the organization. I can’t wait to hear what you think about the bear and the rain, and I can’t wait to meet with you again next week, right here. Thanks for listening.