**Four Principles of Interpersonal Communication**

These principles underlie the workings in real life of interpersonal communication. They are basic to communication. We can't ignore them

**Interpersonal communication is inescapable**

We can't not communicate. The very attempt not to communicate communicates something. Through not only words, but through tone of voice and through gesture, posture, facial expression, etc., we constantly communicate to those around us. Through these channels, we constantly receive communication from others. Even when you sleep, you communicate. Remember a basic principle of communication in general: people are not mind readers. Another way to put this is: people judge you by your behavior, not your intent.

**Interpersonal communication is irreversible**

You can't really take back something once it has been said. The effect must inevitably remain. Despite the instructions from a judge to a jury to "disregard that last statement the witness made," the lawyer knows that it can't help but make an impression on the jury. A Russian proverb says, "Once a word goes out of your mouth, you can never swallow it again."

**Interpersonal communication is complicated**

No form of communication is simple. Because of the number of variables involved, even simple requests are extremely complex. Theorists note that whenever we communicate there are really at least six "people" involved: 1) who you think you are; 2) who you think the other person is; 30 who you think the other person thinks you are; 4) who the other person thinks /she is; 5) who the other person thinks you are; and 6) who the other person thinks you think s/he is.

We don't actually swap ideas, we swap symbols that stand for ideas. This also complicates communication. Words (symbols) do not have inherent meaning; we simply use them in certain ways, and no two people use the same word exactly alike.

Osmo Wiio gives us some communication maxims similar to Murphy's law (Osmo Wiio, *Wiio's Laws--and Some Others* (Espoo, Finland: Welin-Goos, 1978):

* If communication can fail, it will.
* If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
* There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.
* The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed.

These tongue-in-cheek maxims are not real principles; they simply humorously remind us of the difficulty of accurate communication. (See also [*A commentary of Wiio's laws*](http://www.cs.tut.fi/~jkorpela/wiio.html) by Jukka Korpela.)

**Interpersonal communication is contextual**

In other words, communication does not happen in isolation. There is:

* *Psychological context*, which is who you are and what you bring to the interaction. Your needs, desires, values, personality, etc., all form the psychological context. ("You" here refers to both participants in the interaction.)
* *Relational context*, which concerns your reactions to the other person--the "mix."
* *Situational context* deals with the psycho-social "where" you are communicating. An interaction that takes place in a classroom will be very different from one that takes place in a bar.
* *Environmental context* deals with the physical "where" you are communicating. Furniture, location, noise level, temperature, season, time of day, all are examples of factors in the environmental context.
* *Cultural context* includes all the learned behaviors and rules that affect the interaction. If you come from a culture (foreign or within your own country) where it is considered rude to make long, direct eye contact, you will out of politeness avoid eye contact. If the other person comes from a culture where long, direct eye contact signals trustworthiness, then we have in the cultural context a basis for misunderstanding.