Communication skills by definition never stand still; we are always learning, and are forever being enriched by new developments, new challenges and new opportunities. The literature is burgeoning, and the importance of good communication skills training is being increasingly recognised by professional bodies. I am delighted therefore to have the opportunity to contribute to these developments in a third edition. No book can cover everything, and the discerning reader will quickly learn how to dip into a range of publications to find the wisdom and guidance needed to enhance best practice. This edition responds to the encouraging feedback from reviewers and readers of the second edition by adding some new material (e.g. complaints, motivational interviewing); generally updating the text as a whole where necessary; and reflecting on the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) recently developed by The College of Social Work. This framework captures the holistic approach for professional practice, and makes some important contributions and insights that other professionals will find useful. Each entry therefore has a new Engaging with the PCF ‘signpost’ to help social work readers in particular to explore these issues further as part of their Continuing Professional Development. Finally, we dare not lose sight of the disastrous breakdown in communications which have resulted in cases of individual abuse and institutional neglect, such as Stafford General Hospital, going undetected or unreported. Too often we hear that such scandals must never happen again, but happen again they do, sometimes on a horrifying scale. It is too easy to read reports and say that lessons must be learned, which clearly they must. This all points in one direction: that communication skills, and the wholehearted commitment of every people-work professional to honest, open, transparent and at times courageous communication with others is not only best practice; it is the only way in which we can safeguard the well-being and dignity of those entrusted to our care. That is why we write such books; that is why you read them and seek to put them into your professional practice.
To be human is to communicate. Whether we realise it or not, all of us all of the time are sending out messages to other people, directly or indirectly, about ourselves and others. From the way we choose to dress, to the gestures we make; from the style and choice of language we use, to the company we keep, we are all the time giving out messages to each other. Sometimes we are heard clearly; often we are misunderstood; occasionally we get it completely wrong. The complexity and fascination of communication is part of the joy of being human.

Some people choose careers and professions where communication skills are of vital importance, where getting it wrong is not an option. The seemingly endless and repetitive checking and double-checking in a hospital before an operation, is due in no small measure to previous poor communication within the National Health Service, resulting in the wrong leg being operated on, or the wrong person being given bad news, or confidential information being divulged to the wrong person. Communication skills are therefore at the very heart of people-work.

The aims of the book

This book is aimed at any of the helping professions for whom good communication skills are an essential part of their role. It will be of particular interest to social workers, not least because the author is deeply involved in social work education, and has many years’ experience in helping students develop their communication skills for this important work. But in these days of multidisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration, it cannot be argued that there is a set of communication skills that is uniquely relevant to any one profession or discipline. Communication skills are communication skills, and it behoves anyone working with other people to take the responsibility for ensuring that these skills are developed to the highest level possible.

For this reason, the admittedly somewhat inelegant term ‘people-worker’ has been adopted throughout. If you are involved in any way at all, with an agency that sets out to help people and offer support, professionally or in a voluntary capacity, then this book is for you. Social workers, probation officers,
doctors, nurses and paramedics, teachers, police officers, youth workers, advice workers, faith community leaders, and many others who work in a wide range of ‘not-for-profit’ helping agencies: these colleagues are the audience that this book seeks to address. Inevitably, there will be issues which have not been covered, or which some disciplines feel should have been given a different focus. No book can be everything to all its readers. Nevertheless, the issues covered here are widely relevant, and the activities included here can be used and applied by colleagues in a wide range of settings. The book is designed to stimulate and develop reflection about how to improve communication skills, and therefore also depends significantly upon the amount of energy and enthusiasm put into it by the reader to maximise its benefits.

A dictionary approach

The design of the book deserves some comment. There are many excellent books already on the market dealing with communication skills for particular professional groups, many of them taking their readers into great depth and great detail. This book does not in any way seek to replace such volumes, or to suggest that they do not repay careful, prolonged and detailed study. They remain core texts for various disciplines. This dictionary approach, with its relevance to a variety of professional disciplines, has been adopted for the following reasons:

- It seeks to be more accessible, by drawing together the main themes for a specific topic into one discussion. In many of the other core texts on the market, you often have to consult the index and then several different pages in order to gain a full picture.
- It acts as both an introduction for a student and as a refresher to the busy practitioner. Key issues and themes are identified to provide a good grasp and overview of the particular topic, with encouragement to more in-depth study by suggesting further reading and deeper reflection.
- It seeks to be especially helpful to mentors, practice educators, supervisors and other experienced colleagues who have responsibility to help trainees and students develop their communication skills, and to develop their awareness. The activities offered throughout the book may be used, therefore, as group or individual discussion starters or in preparation for supervision. Its accessible, even conversational, style reflects a relationship between a tutor/supervisor/trainee and a worker or student. It seeks to talk with the reader about important themes in an encouraging and facilitative way so that they can develop their own style with confidence.

There are nevertheless some challenges to this approach. No book can ever be totally comprehensive, and inevitably there will be some readers who feel that the choice of topics has been incomplete. There is also the difficulty of avoiding unnecessary repetition. To help achieve this, some themes have been
brought together into a more general discussion. The themes of resilience and a strengths perspective, for example, are discussed under the heading of empowerment, and some of the core aspects of active listening have been explored under that heading rather than commanding several individual entries, to help achieve a coherent approach. The reader is signposted to these general discussions where necessary.

**Introducing communication skills**

Implicit throughout this is a comprehensive understanding of what is meant by communication skills for people-work. There are, of course, some very specific skills and techniques, such as the use of open questions and genograms, which may be seen as the people-worker’s equivalent of the carpenter’s ability to make mortice and tenon joints accurately. These are skills that can be identified and practised as part of the worker’s communication skills toolkit, and will help them to do a better job. But communication is a far more complex phenomenon than a set of discrete skills. It is something to do with the whole person, the context in which you work, and ultimately the societal values that serve as a backdrop for the work you undertake. For this reason, the entries in this book will be more than a set of definitions; they offer a far more wide-ranging and discursive approach, and will seek to track the ‘ripples in the pond’ that your interventions with people create. There will be some entries, therefore, which tackle a certain key theme in people-work and invite you to explore what communication skills will be important in order to deal successfully with this topic. One example of this is the entry on breaking bad news. This skill is beginning to feature strongly in the communication skills training for doctors, but anyone involved in people-work will appreciate the need to have this sensitivity developed. It is one of the distinctive features of this dictionary that such themes are given detailed treatment: this is one of many areas where practitioners feel the need for guidance and encouragement, and which are often missing from some of the standard textbooks.

There is always a danger, admittedly, of giving the impression that there is only one right way of dealing with issues. When it comes to agency guidelines and procedures, of course, practitioners need to know what to do and what course of action to follow. But with the rich tapestry of communication skills, it would be far from helpful to give the suggestion that we are trying to clone people into certain behaviours. There is nothing worse than being dealt with by someone who seems to be on ‘auto-pilot’, and who deals with us mechanistically, without that essential spark of warm humanity. This book has a different aim altogether. It seeks to encourage the practitioner, at whatever stage they may be in their careers as people-workers, to use the entries
as pictures and as mirrors. When we look at a picture, we should be drawn into it, and be able to appreciate both the overall story it seeks to communicate, and also some of the fine detail that is important to the theme. It helps us to learn, and to widen our appreciation. In a mirror, however, we see ourselves as we are, and this helps us appreciate ways in which we need to change and develop to improve our practice. There is a constant implicit theme throughout the book: how will you handle issues in such a way that you can make these skills part of the ‘real you’ as a practitioner, so that they have an integrity and genuineness about them when you are working with someone else? One thing you can be sure of: people will pick up very quickly whether you are conveying genuine human interest, care and concern, or whether you are simply ‘going through the motions’.

It is very easy, unfortunately, to hide behind the professional practitioner role. To do your job effectively, it is important that you fulfil this professional role properly, because it highlights what you can and cannot do with and for the other person. You will want to come across as caring and friendly, but you are not there to be a friend. Your role is both time-limited and task-oriented: when the job is done, you must end the relationship and close the file. What happens afterwards is not your concern. But hiding behind the role is a different story. This is when you do the job automatically, and with little warmth; you seem ‘dead behind the eyes’, as if you do not really care about what you are doing; and you fall into the trap that divides the world into two groups: first, the professional, trained helpers who are the experts; they know what they are doing and are competent in their roles, and should be treated with respect and gratitude, come what may, by those who fall into the second group. These are the unfortunate ones, who are problem-laden, inadequate and unable to cope, who need help and support, and who would quickly ‘go under’ were it not for the service which the professionals provide. Such attitudes lead to arrogance, and undermine the essential value base of people-work that celebrates the dignity, value and worth of each and every human being. It also denies the fact that, in their personal lives, many professional practitioners experience the full range of turmoil, failure and incompetence as does anyone else. Also, many people who approach professionals for help and support display a far greater ability to cope and have deeper resources of resilience than is often realised. The helping relationship, therefore, that communication skills are there to facilitate, needs a measure of humility, human warmth and genuineness that respects the common humanity that we all share, and a willingness to respect and enhance the determination that other people display in tackling the problems and difficulties which beset them.

To hide behind the professional role also carries the danger of ‘taking over’. However satisfying it may feel to do something for the other person – and there will be occasions when this is wholly appropriate – in the end the real
‘litmus test’ of our work is the extent to which the other person becomes more able to take responsibility for their own life. This is not a re-working of the tired maxim to encourage people ‘to stand on their own two feet’. Society is structured in such a complex way these days that the pressures which undermine people’s capacity and resilience are ever increasing. It is, however, a reflection of the value base of people-work that respects the dignity of each individual and the strengths we all have to a greater or lesser degree. If your professional help and support can trigger a range of resources, both internal and external, to facilitate this enhanced capacity to cope, your role is validated, but to do this there has to be a valued, effective professional relationship between you.

Levels of skill

The issue of levels of skill is an important dimension to this theme. Trevithick (2012) discusses the journey from basic, through intermediate, to advanced skills which social workers, and indeed all people-workers, will need to take in order to maximise their effectiveness. There are basic foundational skills, such as knowing how and when to use open and closed questions, and how to begin to forge a professional relationship, that need to be introduced to students on their education and training courses so that they can develop a basic level of confidence before they are ‘let loose’ on the general public. Such is the nature of people-work, however, that it is not possible to plan your progress through a set of increasingly complex stages of communication skills. A surgeon needs to do this: you would not wish to have a complete novice undertake highly complex operations: a gradual progression through the range of medical knowledge and skills is essential, with each stage needing to be effectively accomplished before taking on more advanced work. In people-work, however, it is not so straightforward. There will be more complex work which, as Woodcock Ross (2011) clearly demonstrates, demands greater experience and expertise before you can begin to undertake it: child protection, complex mental health work, specialist advice and tribunal work are examples that spring to mind. Generalist skills need to be enriched by a set of specialist knowledge and skills for such work to be undertaken successfully.

But in terms of the communication skills you need to practise, there is no guarantee whatsoever that the interview that seemed on paper to be simple and straightforward will not suddenly take you into unchartered territory of complexity, where sensitive communication is all important. This illustrates the dilemma that supervisors and practice educators have when selecting work for an inexperienced student: you never know what is going to happen! The approach taken in this dictionary, therefore, does not seek to give each entry a ‘complexity rating’: it takes for granted that the level to which you
will be able to go with the person depends upon two interweaving factors: your skills at exploring, and their willingness to trust you and to go deeper.

A relatively inexperienced worker, for example, could establish a basic level of communication with the other person, and deal effectively with what sometimes is called the ‘presenting problem’. This may seem straightforward enough, and may be dealt with very quickly. The real skill comes in working out whether or not the ‘real’ reason for the person coming to you is much deeper and more complex. Being able to explore this possibility requires a great level of sensitivity that some workers have ‘in spades’ from day one, while with others it takes time to develop. So the new student who is very sensitive might find that they are uncovering much deeper issues than either they or their supervisor suspected were there, precisely because they had the ability to explore and probe sensitively. By contrast, a worker who has not developed this capacity might find that they are getting through their caseload in double-quick time simply because they are not able to reach a deeper level.

There is no ‘cut and dried’ route to success in this: it almost always depends upon the indefinable quality of the ‘chemistry’ between the worker and the other person, and the extent to which they have been able to develop a trusting relationship together. Without that, the interview is likely to remain at a relatively superficial level. But even for an excellent worker there can be pitfalls: the other person may ‘put the shutters up’; factors to do with age, ‘race’, gender and class may prove far more influential upon the outcome than had been realised. This is what makes people-work so fascinating, rewarding, frustrating and at times bewildering, not just at the outset of your career, but all the way through. And it is for this reason that reflective practice and supervision are so essential to you throughout your career. You need always to be looking into the mirror of reflective practice to ensure that you are always giving of your best and are using your communication skills to the best effect.

Each entry therefore may be utilised by both the novice and the ‘old hand’: all that is needed is the professional openness and willingness to be continually evaluating and improving your practice with the constant oscillation between getting the basics right and pushing back the boundaries of your expertise.

How best to use this book

For it to be most effective and useful, this book needs to be regarded as a working tool that can be quickly and easily accessed, as well as being an encouragement to a more in-depth reflection. However it is used, it seeks to recognise and strengthen your commitment as a practitioner to develop your communication skills, and to be a working companion in your journey towards professional excellence.
The dictionary approach enables you to go straight to the topic or theme that interests you. You will gain a brief overview by reading through each topic, but because communication skills are not to be seen in isolation from each other, you will be signposted to some related concepts dealt with elsewhere in the book to broaden and deepen your knowledge and understanding.

Suggestions for further reading are provided to help you engage with topics at a greater depth. The focus in this book is on communication skills: it is not a dictionary of social work, for example, where some of the theoretical concepts would be discussed in great detail. This book is designed to help you ‘operationalise’ these concepts, not to provide you with a complete discussion of their complexity.

For this reason, considerable emphasis has been placed upon offering activities throughout the book. These have been designed both as individual and as group activities. The book is also designed to be a resource for practice educators, supervisors, mentors, academic teachers and trainers to use as part of their training and teaching programmes. You may well be asked therefore to study a particular entry and to complete the activity(ies) relevant to that theme in preparation for your next supervision or group training event. To use the book in this way will deeply enrich your learning.

One of the distinctive features of this book is that special care has been taken to provide guidance and exercises on topics or themes which do not appear in some of the other books on the market. Breaking bad news, chairing meetings, giving presentations and exploring religious and spiritual issues as part of professional practice are some of the topics where a more detailed treatment is justified in order to maximise the usefulness of the book. For many of the topics there are parallel discussions elsewhere in the literature to which you will be signposted through further reading, enabling this book to offer a more succinct approach. Where I feel I am breaking new ground, however, I have given more space to the discussion. But this is not to suggest that word length is the only indicator of importance. Far from it!

I hope that this book will become ‘well-thumbed’ as a valued travelling companion in your professional practice. But the ultimate test of its usefulness will be the extent to which you commit yourself to engage with the issues raised so that the quality of the professional relationships with the people you work with is enhanced. Travel well and practise better!

References
