he helical model of communication was developed in 1967 by Frank Dance, which he originally named “Dance’s Helix Model of Communication”.

**The model views communication as:**

1. Cyclical,
2. Influenced by time and experience,
3. Continuous,
4. Non-Repetitive, and
5. Accumulative (getting increasingly more complex and ‘knowledgeable’

**1. The Five Characteristics of the Helical Model**

These five characteristics of the helical model are represented through the visual metaphor of a cone-shaped “helical” spring. Communication starts in a small circle, but winds out more and more with each cycle of communication:

**2. The Development of Dance’s Helix Model**

Dance’s model builds on a range of improvements in communication models that took place in the mid-20th Century.

Here are the progressions:

1. **Linear Models:**Early models of communication saw it as a linear process: someone says something and another person receives it. A famous version of a linear model is the [Shannon-Weaver](https://helpfulprofessor.com/shannon-weaver-model/) model.
2. **Circular Models:**[Osgood and Schramm](https://helpfulprofessor.com/osgood-schramm/), however, introduced a cyclical model, whereby communication goes out, but also comes back as *feedback*. From here on, the cyclical model overshadowed the linear model when thinking about communication.
3. **The Helical Model:**Dance’s model builds upon the idea that communication happens in a circular process. However, Dance proposed that communication never perfectly repeats itself. When we get information back from someone, we’ll use that new information to say something smarter and in a more informed way next time.

Dance’s model accommodates for improvements in our communication by creating a time-based third dimension. Now, instead of communication looking like a two dimensional circle, it looks like a three dimensional spring.

## 3. Why a Cone Shape?

There are two benefits of the cone shape. First, it shows that communication is increasingly complex and accumulative. Second, it shows that all complex communication comes from simple origins.

### a) Communication is Increasingly Complex and Accumulative

Dance tried to represent the increasing complexity of communication by representing it in a cone shape.

Our original communications might be small, simple discussions. But, as we get more knowledgeable, we can speak about more things in more ways. We’ll increase our vocabulary, knowledge-base and skill in communication. This is represented by increasingly larger and larger circles within the diagram.

### b) Complex Communication comes from Simple Origins

The small circles at the bottom of the cone represent a very simple communication cycle. It may represent the first piece of information you learn about something in a communication event.

For example, the first interaction may be simply to learn someone’s name. It is a simple piece of knowledge sharing.

The next time you chat, you may discuss something more deeply: your might discuss who your families are, or what your jobs are. The increasing depth and complexity is represented by a wider circle.

## Eventually, you may discuss more and more topics until one day you’re sharing with one another deeply held secrets. You are familiar with each other’s mannerisms and moods, and all of this impacts how you interact. This great complexity in communication is represented by a much wider circle at the top of the helix.4. Examples of Dance’s Model

### a) The Baby Example

Dance explains his helical model with the example of a person learning throughout their life cycle. They start early on with very rudimentary communication methods. They may cry at their mother to get her attention, then, later they might learn to speak in single words, then full sentences, and so on.

As our communication processes become more complex, we build on what we already know to learn to communicate more effectively. Each communication experience (a chat with someone, a chance at public speaking, our first interview) contains within it lessons on how to communicate more effectively in the future.
When we are babies, we’re at the base of the communication funnel with tiny little circles representing simplistic methods of communication.

By old age, our communication skills are more advanced – some may even call us wise. This wise older person would be on one of the larger communication cycles toward the top of Dance’s communication helix.

### b) The Rocky Marriage Example

Galvin and Wilkinson (2011) explain how Dance’s helix model might explain a relationship between a husband and wife. Their example shows a practical example of how communication is always built upon past experiences.

They note:

*“The helix representation provides support for the concept that “You can’t put a relationship in reverse and erase a difficult period of time.” We have stopped counting the times we have heard, “If only things could go back to the way they were two years ago.” Or “I want to wipe the last 6 months of our marriage.” In reality each encounter adds experience and meaning to a relationship; this history cannot be denied.” (Galvin and Wilkinson, pp. 7-8)*

This example helps show how each communication event leads to deeper understanding and complexity. We learn from each cycle of the communication process. This is represented by the increasingly bigger and bigger spiral after each cycle of communication.

## 5. Advantages and Disadvantages of a Helix Model

### a) Advantages of Dance’s Model include:

* The model can be used to represent an individual communication event between two people, or one person’s growing communication skills over a long period of time.
* The model takes into account the dimension of time in ways that most other models fail to do.
* The model takes into account the ways learning throughout a cycle of communication leads to increasing complexity.
* There is acknowledgement that every experience impacts upon our future actions, and that we cannot get a chance at re-doing an argument, discussion or moment that has passed.

### b) Disadvantages of Dance’s Model include:

* There is little insight into the role of forgetting or deleting old ways of communicating in this model. There is the implication that communication development is, in its own way, simply linear. There is never a backward step.
* The model assumes continuity and does not account for moments when there are breaks in communication or we are not learning to communicate any more effectively.
* It is unclear (to me) if the cycle represents growing ability to communicate or growing knowledge during the process of communication (it could be misread as a ‘learning spiral’ as opposed to a ‘communication spiral’ per se)
* The model is somewhat ambiguous due to its abstract nature. Other models like the Osgood-Schramm and [Lasswell](https://helpfulprofessor.com/lasswell-model-of-communication/) models are very clear in the steps involved in each communication ‘cycle’ or ‘step’, whereas Dance’s model doesn’t show the processes that occur within the cycle itself.
* The model is apparently out of use today. Very few scholarly articles cite it on google scholar, implying it has little use or value to contemporary communication scholars.