



TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

ADAPTED FROM CHAPTERS 4 AND 5 IN

CULTURE INFUSION:

***9 PRINCIPLES FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING
A THRIVING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE***

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When it comes to the topic of communication, specifically *effective* communication, I often think of a quote by Henry Ford: “If there is any one secret to success, it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from [their] angle as well as your own.”

In theory, communication is simple: talking and getting one’s point across. This simplified picture fails to recognize that communication two-way street, and that communication means nothing if the message was wrongly interpreted or not received at all. Instead, this e-book will focus on another aspect of communication: **Listening**.

Take a few moments to reflect on these three questions:

1. When was the last time you truly listened to what the other person was saying?
2. When someone is talking, are you thinking about your response?
3. How many times do you get off subject because each person is interjecting to relate to the other?

We are often so focused on talking that we forget to listen to others first. We miss out when we don’t listen, because taking time to listen actually sparks creativity and boosts esteem. Imagine interacting with peers who are motivated and inspired to do great work each day, and who enjoy each other! Listening is a big part of that and is important in all relationships, not just professional ones.

Whether at work or at home with our significant other or our kids, listening is necessary for building trust. With trust come enhanced relationships that build a stable culture for continued success not only in the workplace but also in our personal lives. The way we are engaging in all aspects of life transfers into our workplaces.

ACTIVE LISTENING: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION

Effective personal communication requires active listening: making a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, trying to understand the complete message being sent. Active listening is about engaging in the conversation in ways beyond just talking. This method requires 5 steps:

1. Practice empathy
2. Focus attention
3. Show listening
4. Suspend judgment
5. Be responsive

Notice that half the steps focus on listening while the other half focus on verifying understanding. The key here is listening to understand, not to relate.

1. PRACTICE EMPATHY

Empathy is where active listening starts. It's the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and see things from their perspective rather than yours. We often don't know what another person might be going through. For example, someone on our team who is typically on point may not be focused on a big deliverable today. We might react with anger, telling them how disappointed we are in their work, and that they better shape up for the next deliverable or they will be in trouble. How helpful do you think that is? Right—not very!

Instead, we could use an empathetic response and ask them how they are doing today, and if everything is okay since their work is not as great as usual. Maybe they had a fight with a loved one, found out someone close to them passed away, or had a leak in their home this morning that caused major damage. When you know this information, you can better understand their true situation and have a useful, direct conversation. They will also see that you care.

Empathy is challenging because we are also facing our own daily struggles and conflict. Yet if we could slow down and take a moment to empathize instead of judging in our relationships, they would go more smoothly. This takes patience and practice.

2. SUSPEND JUDGEMENT

What usually happens when someone offers information or a suggestion? We try to decide if we agree with it or not. And if we disagree, we are quick to let that be known! However, the speaker may not want to continue if there is a feeling you are not in agreement before they have even finished communicating.

When we instead suspend judgment, we aren't concerned with agreeing or disagreeing; we just want to understand the other person's message. We allow the speaker to portray their message without interrupting them, being careful not to derail what they are saying.

My personal motto for communication is "Listen to understand." Believe me, I haven't always used this approach. I used to get in arguments all the time, convinced that I was being totally reasonable. However, as I look back, I see I was not. I was often in a blame game, judging and feeling that I was right and the other person was wrong. I now understand more clearly that we all play a role in each situation and we have to take accountability for that role even if it's not intentional. In the past, I wasn't listening, so I wasn't understanding the complete situation. Without the broader viewpoint of understanding, my conversations often turned into arguments and ongoing conflict.

Even if you do not agree with someone, be mindful and assert your opinions gracefully and in due time. Treat the other person with the respect and compassion you would also want. One practice that helps us suspend judgment is to resist making assumptions. When we make assumptions about a person or situation, we are basically saying that we already know what is really going on and don't need to verify our understanding with anyone else. We have already made our own judgment without all the facts and perspectives.

Making assumptions is basically making up stories without checking the facts. We might assume that our boss is ignoring us when s/he thought we prefer to work as independently as possible. We might assume that people are intentionally trying to hurt us when they had no idea we were upset. We might assume things about what others need or want. You can imagine how this can lead to poor communication.

3. BE RESPONSIVE

Remember to show that you are listening. Asking questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing what you heard back to the speaker will make a huge difference in shared understanding.

4. ASK QUESTIONS

The questioning process enables us to become more interested in what the other person is saying. Also, when we listen to someone respond to our question, we may see the situation more clearly, or—better yet—the person we are communicating with might come to their own resolution. Effective questions encourage others to continue forward.

Keep in mind that there is an art to asking questions. Questions can either open up or shut down a conversation. Which approach do you think is more effective: having a “learner” mindset or a “judger” mindset? (Hint: Reread the earlier “Suspend Judgment” section.)

The learner mindset focuses on questions that are proactive and foster new possibilities:

- What can we do about this?
- What is one thing that seems impossible? What would make it possible?
- How can we stay on track?
- What can we learn from this?

On the other hand, judging questions are reactive and focus on the past. Be careful not to ask:

- Why did you fail again?
- Whose fault is this?
- Why can't you get this right?
- When will you learn? (Yes, rhetorical questions also have impact.)

Questions are powerful tools that can either hinder or catapult forward movement. As Albert Einstein said, “It is not that I’m so smart. But I stay with the questions much longer.” He was constantly asking learner questions.

Take a moment to ask those why, what, and what if questions. Below is a list of potential learner questions to ask, either with your employees or modified for personal interactions:

- Why do you feel this happened?
- Could we go another direction?
- Are there untapped resources we could utilize?
- What happens if we shift our focus to...?

What are some other questions you could ask to encourage forward movement?

5. VERIFY UNDERSTANDING

Another way to be directly responsive is to summarize or paraphrase back to the speaker what you heard, asking them to verify or correct what you understood. This might seem like an unnecessary step if you have followed all the active listening tips, but direct verification can still uncover unexpected misunderstandings.

Far too often, conflict arises when we don't understand the full picture. We are quick to make assumptions so we can move on to making decisions. If you have a conversation where information is exchanged, wrap it up with a summary statement. Summarizing will not only ensure accurate follow-through, it will help to ensure both parties are on the same page with shared understanding.

This shared understanding is important in any conversation, actually. Paraphrase back to the speaker what you heard to verify it is the message they intended to get across. In any conversation, you can verify understanding with statements such as:

- What I am hearing is...
- Sounds like you are saying...
- When you say..., do you mean...?
- So what we have agreed on is [fill in the blank]. Is that correct?

Yes, this careful attention and response does take some extra time, but I assure you it is well worth it! Shared understanding and clear communication save plenty of time and energy down the road by avoiding miscommunication, frustration, and conflict.

MIND-EXPANDING EXPERIENCE

STEP 1:

Pair in groups of 2.

STEP 2:

Choose a topic—business or personal.
Ex: "What is one issue you are facing, and how would you like to positively resolve it?"

STEP 3:

One person talks for 2-3 minutes while the other listens fully, staying engaged without talking. (Tip: Have the person with the darkest hair color go first.)

STEP 4:

Switch talker/listener roles for 2–3 minutes.

STEP 5:

Pairs discuss for 2–3 minutes any thoughts that came up as they listened.

STEP 6:

Share with the group the challenges of this listening exercise



THE 3P METHOD

While active listening is important for preventing conflict, it can also be useful for resolving conflict as well. Another tool that may help is the 3P method. At Actualize, we use this tool as a guideline for handling conflict, and we encourage our team to think through these steps when negative emotions arise. We all strive to Pause to Pivot to the Positive, using those three steps to bring together our individual awareness, open and honest communication (with active listening), and shared resolution of the issue by moving forward together.

|| STEP 1: PAUSE TO CONQUER NEGATIVITY

How many times a day do you catch yourself immediately thinking a negative thought? How many times do you say to others, "Don't be so defensive"? As humans, our natural tendency is a bias toward negativity caused by parts of our brains that are quickly triggered to "avoid harm" while slower to react to "pursuing rewards."

Negativity is part of our composition. The challenge we face, then, is how to shift our focus. We will explore an example of how my team traversed our negative emotions to take the higher, more positive road.

One of my internal team's key responsibilities is to recruit and hire talent. Being in a niche market, we take pride in our abilities to equip our client-facing team with the best resources. Therefore, when we heard the following statement from that team, our fight response came to the surface.

- "I have no confidence that your team can provide us with the resources we need."

What if the following would have been said instead?

- "I want to help your team devise a solution to ensure we have the resources we need."



Which one feels better? Notice how you immediately feel different simply with a change in verbal messaging. Have you ever realized you respond rapidly to problems more so than possibilities? When we are stuck on the negative, we fail to notice the positives, and a tornado of feelings may spiral out of control. In our team example, the first statement was made and immediately put us on the defense, since we strive for team satisfaction and didn't realize we apparently hadn't delivered. Both sides dove right into a nasty battle of blame, which did not feel good and was not best for our team. We reacted when we should have paused.

Allowing the negative feelings without reacting is certainly not easy. It takes time to remember that negative tendencies are natural, and practice to realize that bottling up those feelings is not healthy. When the blood is boiling, make an effort not to react. Instead, PAUSE to settle your feelings and allow the tension to pass.

STEP 2: PIVOT

When we are consumed with our feelings, many times moving to the positive is the mountain to climb. In order to PIVOT out of the negative spiral, it is essential to take time to explore what happened. What is your side? What would an outsider's perspective be? Can you identify why there was a challenge? Let's take a moment to go back to my team and the initial negative comment: "I have no confidence that your team can provide us with the resources we need."

- **Our Side:** We were not clear on the exact resources the client-facing team needed, nor the timing or the urgency as we were getting direction from multiple sources.
- **Outsiders Perspective:** The current client-facing team was working overtime and submitted a job requirement; they thought they had done what was needed.
- **Why a Challenge:** Both sides thought they were doing the right thing, but without fully communicating to each other. When there was finally a discussion, both sides were already frustrated and hence all the negative emotions.

In this scenario, do you think either side really wanted to fight or fail the other? That possibility might sound ridiculous, but since that negative tendency is part of our composition, it is extremely important to acknowledge it and practice pausing before we react. Once my team got over the initial fight response and remembered we are all on the same larger team, we were all able to have the difficult – and clarifying — conversation of walking through the above exercise. Both sides left feeling relief at being heard and a repaired compassion toward each other.

STEP 3: POSITIVE POSSIBILITIES

As we wrapped up our call, we identified the opportunities to move forward in finding the appropriate people to fill our resource needs. Since then, we have been having more regular calls to ensure both sides are briefed on the daily changes in project needs. Henry David Thoreau said, "We are always paid for our suspicion by finding what we suspect." This is the basic message great leaders portray: we see what we expect to see. If we expect to see the negative, we will see it; if we instead look for the positive, then that's what we will see.

By changing our focus, we can discover the silver lining in any scenario. In our situation, the positives now shine brightly as we are expanding into exciting new areas of growth together. We want to live by our byline of "our expertise and commitment driving your success." The recipe to success is held together with teamwork and



MIND-EXPANDING EXPERIENCE

Document the 3P Method with a recent scenario you experienced:

1. What negative feeling did you experience? Why?
2. How could you have changed your negative response?
3. What positive could or did happen from this situation?

Remember, no matter how smoothly life is going, you will face conflict. You have the power to change the outcome, starting with how you communicate in a tense situation.

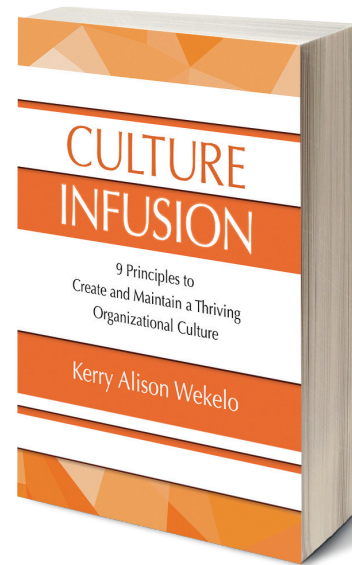
CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: A REFLECTION

1. When was the last time you and your team faced conflict?
2. How does your team communicate?
 - a. What do you do well?
 - b. What can you improve?
3. What is one positive step you can make to change how you handle conflict?
4. How can the 3P Method change how you interact in a negative situation?



Culture Infusion is your guide to improve corporate culture and motivate your employees to perform at their highest capacity. Culture Infusion is for leaders and aspiring leaders who want to build a legacy, shift perspectives, and lead by example so others are inspired and driving to be their best selves. Whether you are a top-level executive or lead a team, you will find valuable insights in this book on how to create and maintain a sought-after workplace. You'll learn how to infuse culture in all aspects of your organization, from your people to your programs, and how we must thrive personally in order to lead others.

Culture Infusion provides nine easy, actionable principles that help you develop a customized game plan that's right for your company. You'll discover helpful tips and tricks to catapult your team to success and improve corporate culture, including the three A's (Accountability, Acumen, Aspiration) that will aid in goal and performance setting, and the 3P method (Pause to Pivot to a Positive) that will change how you view every challenge and communicate more effectively.



ABOUT KERRY

As Managing Director of Human Resources and Operations for Actualize Consulting since 2005, author Kerry Alison Wekelo brings us a front-row seat perspective on her experiences, blending her corporate knowledge with her mindful wisdom. She is also a yoga teacher, life coach, award-winning author of children's books, and the founder and visionary of Zendoway, a company that encourages holistic wellness. Through years of personal exploration, Kerry has discovered that focusing on overall wellness creates healthier relationships and provides transformative insight into both our personal and professional lives. Kerry lives in Reston, Virginia with her two children. She invites readers to email her at kelam@actualizeconsulting.com

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