

Module 1 / Chapter 9

Communication awareness

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9.1 Objectives



Persons completing this module

- use examples to correctly explain the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication.
- independently and correctly distinguish the “relational” and “substantive” aspects of communications.
- correctly explain the difference between the transmitter and recipient of a communication and can independently switch their perspective.
- recite the feedback rules and correctly apply them in practice.
- correctly and independently describe potential stress reactions in communications.

9.2 Communication

What is communication?

Communication means the exchange of information.

How do human beings communicate?

The most important means of human communication is language. Nevertheless, non-linguistic or non-verbal communications (facial expression, gestures, eye contact, intonation, body language / body movements and tone of voice and manner of speaking) are important components of communication.

“Humans cannot not communicate.”
(Paul Watzlawick)

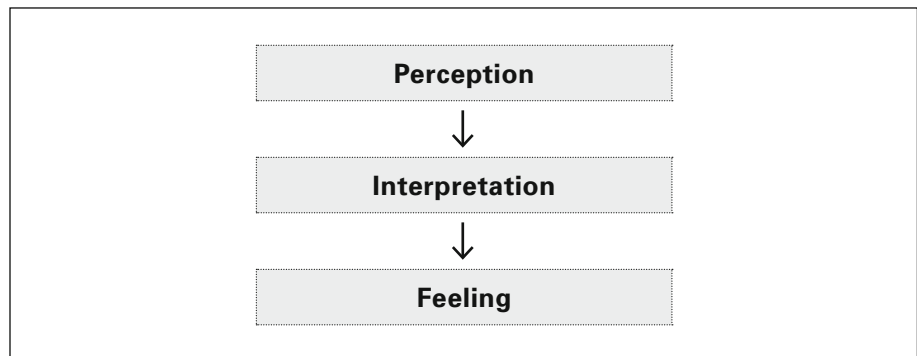
Humans always simultaneously use multiple means of communication to communicate. A human being chooses words, gestures, changes facial expression, body language or physical distance from a counterpart. The entire spectrum of human behaviour has informational value and is communicative in nature; it is not merely a question of the words spoken.

Personal attitudes in communication

However, communication is not primarily a question of mastering techniques. It is strongly influenced by our personal attitudes and feelings towards ourselves and towards those with whom we are communicating.

Perception

For inner clarity in the mind of the recipient of communication and in terms of the recipient's ability to give feedback, the following distinction is of prime significance.



We communicate as we perceive.

Perception

Perception means seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching.

Interpretation

Interpretation means attaching meaning to something we have perceived, e.g. interpreting a look as derogatory or a question as criticism. The goal is not to avoid interpretation. This is neither possible nor desirable, because only interpretation enables us to understand a statement made. What is important is to be aware that one is engaging in interpretation – and that one's interpretation may be correct or incorrect.

Feeling

Feeling means to respond to what one has perceived and interpreted with one's own feelings; one's own psychological state helps to determine what sort of feeling is triggered (e.g. anger at a derogatory look). This feeling is not subject to a "right or wrong" evaluation, but rather is a fact. As a rule, we have little practice in distinguishing these three processes that take place within us.

Verbal and non-verbal communication

We distinguish between verbal and non-verbal communication:

Verbal communication

Verbal communication is spoken and written communication. Humans are able to exercise a high level of control over their verbal communications. Humans instinctively tend to hide their true feelings in their verbal statements in order to protect themselves.

Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication includes all non-linguistic expression: facial expression, gestures, eye contact, body language, body movements, intonation, tone of voice and manner of speaking. Non-linguistic expression is just as important as linguistic expression. Non-verbal expression is quicker, more direct and less filtered than verbal expression, and thus provides important clues and signals for interpreting verbal expression.

Non-verbal communications can be broken down into the following main categories:

Paralanguage

This definition encompasses non-verbal expression which accompanies language or sounds produced by the human voice such as laughing, crying, yawning, groaning, sighing, etc.

Paralanguage can be utilised consciously, but it also may appear unconsciously. Paralinguistic information signals different states: boredom, fatigue, pain, sadness, joy, etc.

In addition to intonation and volume, the tempo of speech are considered paralingual.

Body language

Body-language signals are provided by eye movements, facial expressions, gestures, body position and proximity or distance from those we are speaking with.

Like paralinguistic reactions, body-language reactions may serve to express highly disparate conditions: attention, interest, curiosity, hostility, uncertainty, affection, etc.



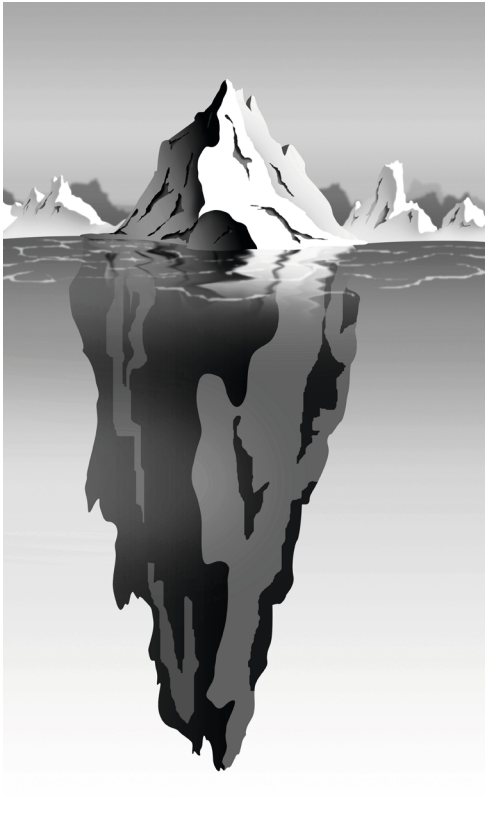
Bottom line

Non-linguistic signals have a very decisive impact on the way a conversation proceeds and on its outcome. Although we use body language signals and our speaking style primarily at an unconscious level, such signals and speaking styles will nevertheless generally reveal more of a person's true feelings than his or her verbal message. Feelings are conveyed primarily by non-verbal means. For this reason, interpretation of communication needs to take account of the overall behaviour of the person we are speaking to and the situation at the time of the conversation. What this means is that conflicts between non-verbal signals and the words that are spoken will trigger insecurity and misunderstanding in the person hearing them.

An experienced communicator hears what the other party means and not what he or she says.

The two levels of communication

Every communication act has two levels, a content level and a relationship level. The latter will determine how the communication progresses (Watzlawick's second axiom)

Content level	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Information- Facts- Work content	
Relationship level	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Affinity- Antipathy- Power- Recognition- Status	



Bottom line

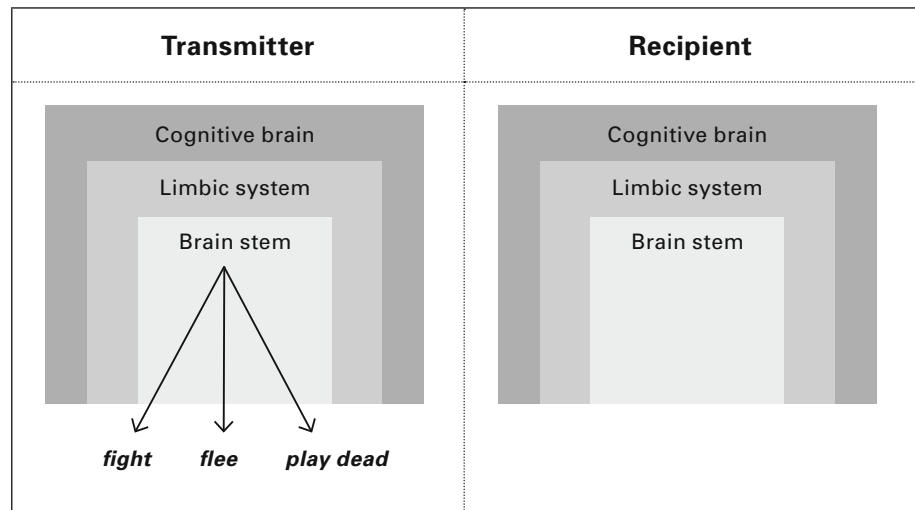
Just as in the case of an iceberg, the largest part of human communications lies "beneath the surface", i.e. it is seemingly invisible and, in many cases, subconscious. This part of human communication is often conveyed by body language (intonation, facial expression, gestures). Our counterparts will register this.

9.3 Stress reactions – An excursion into the human brain

(Source: Vera F. Birkenbihl: Freude durch Stress)

When irritations or stress, etc. arise in human communications or in human interactions generally, we tend to react with our reptilian brain (brain stem).

Change can likewise trigger these stress reactions in the human. This will be more likely to happen when people who are unaccustomed to change are confronted with frequent change.



The reptilian brain (brain stem)

The reptilian brain (brain stem, ancestral brain) is the oldest part of the brain, which already existed 450 million years ago. This is where all of the programmes outside normal consciousness reside, such as breathing, body temperature, and blood circulation. It also encompasses the functions underlying preservation of the species, for example: the sex drive, the instinct to protect children, the drive for food, territorial behaviour.

Because the reptilian brain has little capacity for learning, it has difficulty dealing with rapidly changing situations.

The limbic system or interbrain

The limbic system is located above the reptilian brain. Every mammal possesses this brain section. This is the locus of emotions such as fear, aggression, love, etc. The limbic system is capable of learning, i.e. it can learn from behavioural successes. This behavioural learning is based on programmes learned unconsciously during earliest childhood. These programmes, which we have unconsciously learned, will trigger “good” or “bad” feelings.

Everything we perceive passes at lightning speed through the limbic system. If the feelings produced at this stage are good or at least neutral, then the cognitive brain can operate. However, if bad feelings are produced, the reptilian brain takes over.

The cognitive brain (neocortex, cerebral cortex)

The cognitive brain is the most recent section of the brain. This section of the brain is what sets Homo sapiens apart. The cognitive brain consists of two walnut-like sections, the right and the left hemispheres. The cognitive brain is responsible for language and for the use of our limbs. This part of the brain is able to process the past, present and future; it has the capacity to plan, and may be rational or intuitive.

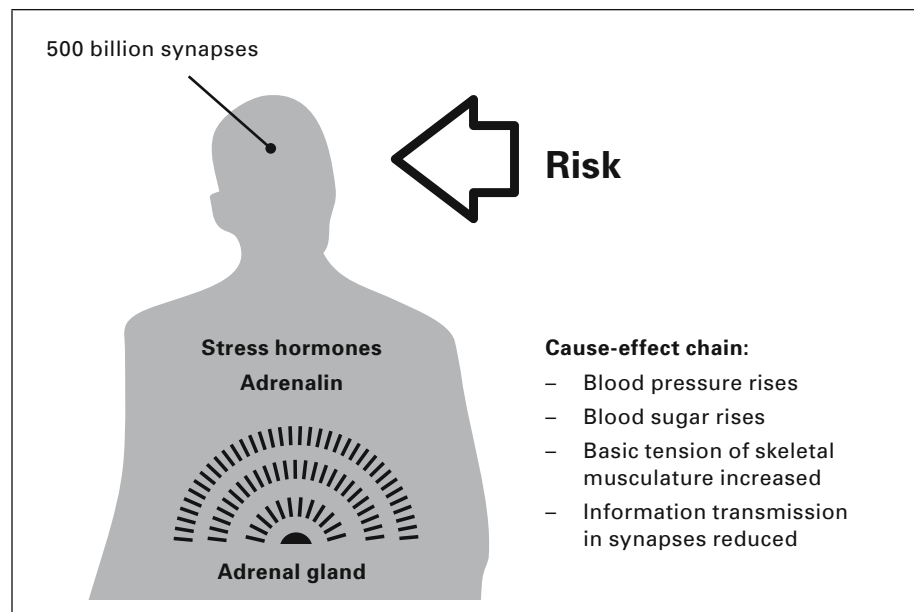


Bottom line

Whenever a dangerous situation arises, our cognitive brain “switches off” and the older sections of the brain take over until the acute danger has passed.

9.4 Stress

Stress as a cause of stage fright and mental blocks



Cause-effect chain: Stress

Stress is the name for a specific psychological and physical reaction of animals and people to external stimuli (stressors), enabling them to handle particularly high demands.

The word stress originally comes not from the realm of psychology, but rather from materials science, and refers to tension or pressure exerted on a material. In 1936, the zoologist Hans Selye borrowed this expression from the realm of physics to designate an “unspecific reaction of the body to demands of any kind”.

Distress and eustress

“Distress” is what one commonly calls “stress”. Distress is the form of stress which is perceived as debilitating (negative), entailing symptoms such as nervousness, stomach pain, sleeplessness, headaches, etc. In addition to distress, there is also stress which is positively perceived, so-called “eustress”.

Zoological basis

The point of departure for Selye was the way an animal deals with an acute danger, such as an encounter with a predator, an aggressor or a physical danger such as a forest fire, etc. The animal must then be more prepared for mobilisation, referring both to the mobilisation of its musculature and circulation and to its attention and decisiveness. For this reason, secretion of the adrenal hormone adrenalin causes a chain of vegetative effects, which ultimately increase blood pressure and blood sugar and the animal’s general muscle tone.¹

In the brain, the relatively slow processing of the cerebral cortex is held back, and the schematic decisional models of the brain stem take priority. This takes place by changes to the secretion patterns of calming serotonin and stimulating noradrenalin in the brain sections in question. The animal is then able to react more quickly, although its error rate is higher. The assessment of the situation by the cerebral cortex, which would usually be more correct, would often be slow enough in a dangerous situation to pose a threat to the animal’s survival.

For this same reason, initial determination of a danger situation tends not to be made via the cerebral cortex, but rather via schematic triggers to which old brain-stem mechanisms react: sudden noise or sudden change of lighting, shrill sounds (death cries), etc. This is the context and connection to the non-specific stressors of day-to-day human life, which constantly produce a physical reaction to purported dangers. The harmful thing about this is that these physical reactions are not processed by the body in the natural way.

¹ Basic tension of skeletal musculature

Stress in the human being

Actually, the definition of stress is the impact (symptoms) caused by trigger factors or stressors. Stressors may, for example, be of a physical nature (cold, heat, noise, bright sunlight, etc.) or they may be toxic substances. Thus, for the human body, cigarette smoke is a stressor. In addition, certain internal attitudes, expectations and fears may be stressors at an emotional level. Thus, stress is the body's adaptation to these stressors, or its reaction to them.

Stress is manifested in cognitive, emotional, muscular, vegetative/hormonal and social reactions. Relevant stress management techniques reduce reactions or attempt to prevent them from arising to begin with. As examples of these, we might cite:

- Sophrology
- Biofeedback¹
- Progressive muscle relaxation²
- Internalisation of problem- or emotion-focused methods for dealing with stress (e.g. consciousness control, positive self-instruction, active avoidance, professional problem-solving approaches, etc.)

¹ The purpose of biofeedback is to use measurements to make a bodily function (e.g. the pulse) accessible to the consciousness (by visualising it on a monitor) and ultimately to enable the patient to improve the regulation of that function.

² Progressive muscle relaxation is a process in which one creates a condition of very deep relaxation in the entire body by deliberately and consciously tensing and releasing certain muscle groups.

Stress may be triggered by

- time pressure
- noise
- lack of money, poverty
- lack of personal options, a lack of interest in one's job or leisure-time activities
- high responsibility
- bullying at work
- shift work (disrupting the sleeping/waking rhythm and consequent health problems)
- constant concentration at work (for example: assembly-line work)
- fear of being inadequate
- social isolation, contempt and neglect
- sleep deprivation
- sensory overload
- illness and pain
- psychological problems, subconscious conflicts
- serious events (such as a burglary of one's home, an operation, an examination)
- the death of a relative
- but also a lack of challenges, boredom and lethargy

Stress has an impact on the human psyche just as it does on the physical wellbeing of a person. Mild or serious illness may be the result.

The forms of harmful, pathological stress are known as distress, meaning concern, worry, anxiety. There is also an effect whereby difficult challenges are perceived and processed by the psyche in a favourable way (Hans Selye: "the salt of life") – if one feels in some way that one is up to the challenge. This positive form of stress is known as eustress.

A special type of stress, "stage fright", may have a positive or a negative impact.

9.5 Feedback

In order to be certain that we are truly engaging with those we are communicating with, we must provide feedback to them. A distinction is made between:

1. Confirmatory feedback: Instructions are not only heard, they are also understood and accepted.
2. Clarifying feedback: Ambiguities can be resolved, incorrect information identified and corrected.
3. Critical feedback: Objections or concerns can be talked through.

Feedback = Providing one's own perceptions back to interlocutor

The Johari Window

The Johari Window (named for its creators Joe Luft and Harry Ingham) is a model used in depicting the changes in self-perception and perception of others in the course of a group process.

Feedback reduces the "blind spot" area, and the area of the arena / public person is increased, by contrast.

known to others	Arena Facts that are disclosed. Traits of which both I and others are aware.	Blind spot Elements of behaviour that only others perceive and of which I am not aware.
	Hidden Areas I consciously hide and which are not perceived by others.	Unconscious Things only accessible to "depth psychology". Neither I nor others are aware of them.
not known to others	<i>known to me</i>	<i>not known to me</i>

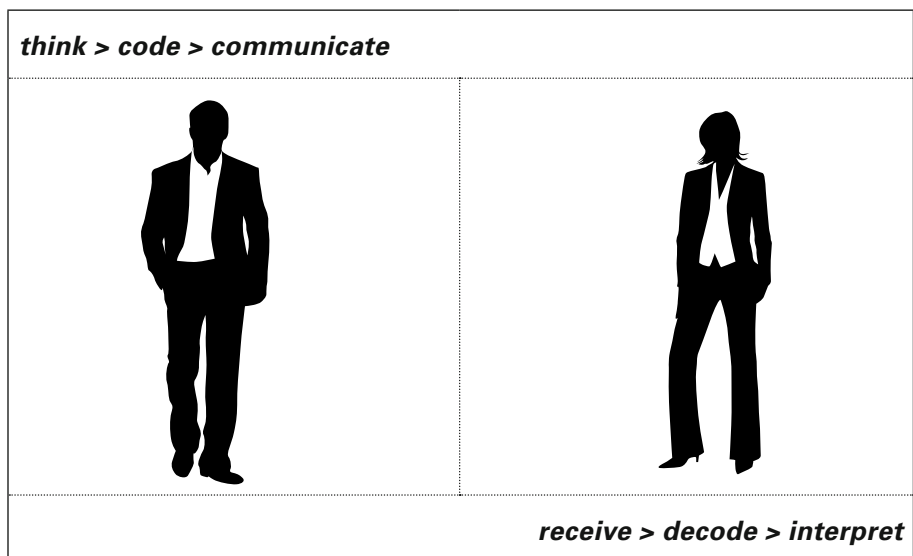
Feedback rules

1. Describe your own personal experience, say in the most concrete terms possible how you felt in response to which statements. The more precisely you are able to describe the behaviour of the other person and your emotional reactions to it, the more helpful your feedback will be.
2. Begin initially with something positive; your counterpart will be much more attentive to what you have to say.
3. You should then formulate what you felt was negative or troubling. Describe your own personal perspective by means of *I-messages*.
4. A person receiving feedback should not proffer justifications. He or she should listen in an interested and attentive way to what the other person tells him or her. He or she is aware of the principle: "The person providing feedback is always right from *his* or *her* perspective."

9.6 Difficult communications

Interpersonal communications In ideal cases, the transmitter and the recipient of the communication are on the same wavelength. This is most likely to be the case when they are discussing an area of common interest, a common problem or a common challenge. In addition, the greater the clarity of emotional state between the transmitter and recipient of the communication is, the more those emotions will recede into the background. A climate of trust is created, which enables the parties to concentrate on substantive problems and substantive issues.

Coding / Decoding messages However, this is not always the case, because the communication process is a complex one. Where the transmitter fails to correctly “package (code) his or her thoughts or feelings, the recipient is unable to correctly unpack (decode) that message. Misunderstandings will accumulate; the parties talk past each other and fail to hear each other’s message. This is a recipe for problems or conflicts.



Problems

Problems at the emotional or relationship level are usually reflected and visible as problems at the content level. Problems at the content level may also be displaced relationship problems.

Objections

Objections are statements at the content level, whereas excuses or pretexts are seemingly at the content level but in reality they come from the relationship level.

Metacommunication

In situations that have become bogged down and tense, we should look over our own shoulders, and think about and discuss how we are communicating with each other. "Metacommunication", or communications about communication, means analysing the way in which we deal with one another, how the communication sent was actually meant and how the communication received is decoded.

***Communications
about communications***

9.7 Speech-thinking

“Speech-thinking” is the complex process of thinking while we are speaking or of speaking while we are thinking. As we speak one of our thoughts aloud the next thought is already being planned. Speech planning and actual talk are time-delayed from each other.

This speech-thought process is the prerequisite to all extemporaneous speaking. It is particularly at risk when we are tense or experiencing stage-fright or difficulties in concentration, and it can be trained by using special speaking exercises. Frequent speech-thought exercises will promote

- spontaneity in speaking,
- the ability to concentrate,
- quick-wittedness and
- confidence.

Exercise:



With no preparation, talk for one minute about “your” subject.

If you should experience a mental block, then you should say: “I can’t think of anything to say.” Silence is not allowed!

9.8 Literature



Body Speech

Contents:	Better understanding oneself and others
Evaluation:	Interesting, many pictures
Author:	Samy Molcho

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