

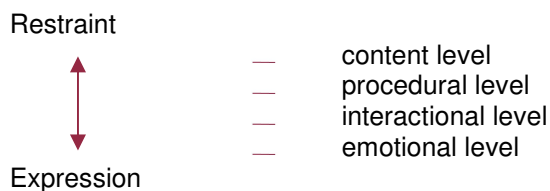


A great communication model

Training module

Communication levels

People have different ways of expressing their feelings. One person lets you see immediately how s/he feels in a particular situation, while it is much more difficult to detect in another person. There are also many different ways in which people make their feelings known and express how they are experiencing a conversation, a situation or a person. Some people immediately blurt it out, while others find it much more difficult to express themselves. The following model can act as an important instrument to give some insight into how you can switch between different levels of communication:



Levels of communication

In communication between people, one can differentiate four aspects:

- Content: The topic being discussed.
- Procedure: Structural aspects of the way the topic is discussed (sequence, time, duration, with whom, form and such like).
- Interactions: How participants deal with one another (expectations, images of one another, mood, behaviour towards one another).
- Feelings: How one feels in that situation.

For example:

Secretary: "I'm much too busy to squeeze that rush job in". The person giving the secretary instructions can in principle respond on each of the four levels:

- Content level: "It is urgent. I don't care how you do it, as long as it's ready tomorrow".
- Procedural level: "Shall we take a look together and see how you can get through all that work?"
- Interactional level: "I'm always barging in here with more work when you're already up to your eyes in things to do".
- Emotional level: "Help me out – I'm really in a fix here because I'll be a laughing stock tomorrow if it's not ready".

These four aspects relate to four levels on which people can communicate.

One level on which we communicate a lot, is the content level, that is, we inform one another factually, we give our point of view, we pose questions, and so on. Due to our upbringing and education, and through the way we function in the workplace, many of us have become used to acting in as much of a business-like way as possible. So we act on the content level, because that is the most effective... or so we believe.

Communication often takes place on different levels, whether we like it or not. We can learn to recognise what levels we and others are using to communicate.

If we can switch smoothly from one level to another and do not seek to communicate only on the content level, this will increase the effectiveness of our communication.

Effective communication: switching between levels

People communicate more effectively if they are better able to recognise these four levels.

If someone – let's call her person A – is about to say something, she can ask herself at that very moment, what level of communication she is about to use. She can then decide whether she wants to communicate on that level, or at another level. Likewise, it is important to recognise the four levels in what the other, person B, is saying. Person A can then decide whether she wants to respond on the same level. In general, it is effective to choose the level to which person B is 'tuned'. In other words, if A does not choose the same level, B may interpret this as talking past one another, not being understood etc. If A acts in a way that doesn't seem to work with B, she should be able to switch to another level.

In short: Person A must be able to recognise the level on which she is communicating, and the level at which the other person is acting. Person A generally communicates more effectively if she can operate at the level at which B is communicating. If A does not adjust to B's level, that should be a deliberate choice. Person A should be able to switch smoothly from one level to the other.

An example

When B sends out a 'message', the receiver, A, often receives it (perhaps out of habit) on the content level. The receiver is, as it were, tuned into that level. If he then responds on that level, experience shows that communication disorders can result. Person B can respond dismissively, retreat, or make an immediate fiery response.

In the example given above, if the person instructing the secretary responds by saying: "It's urgent. I don't care how you do it as long as it's ready tomorrow", it's not difficult to predict the secretary's reaction. She will be disappointed or angry. And even if the principal then says: "Well, if you can't do it, you can't", the secretary will probably continue to be out of sorts!

When such a communication disorder arises, the cause is generally the result of B having said something on, for example, the interactional or emotional levels – but A has not acknowledged that. If A is able to recognise the message and to respond accordingly, fewer problems will arise.

Secretary: "I'm much too busy to squeeze that rush job in". On further reflection, the person giving the instruction realises that the secretary is apparently communicating on the emotional level. So the level of communication to consider using first is also the emotional level. Switch levels!

Perhaps the response will then be: "Help me out – I'm really in a fix here because I'll be a laughing stock tomorrow if it's not ready". Naturally, such a remark does not automatically clear the air. There may still be some tension between the two. But at least the secretary will not experience the other as a cold, aloof individual who responds only in a business-like way (on the content level). That is at least a step in the right direction. Moreover, a solution for the real issue, the urgent job which must be done, may be possible if the principal follows the remark on the emotional level with a procedural remark. The follow-up goes like this: "Shall we take a look together and see how you can get through all that work?"

Multiple levels at the same time

So far, we have considered the four levels of communication as if they are used separately. But it's more complicated than that. Often two or more levels are used simultaneously.

Secretary: "I'm much too busy to squeeze that rush job in". We have assumed that this secretary is communicating on an emotional level. But we could also say that the secretary is communicating on the content level, that this is simply a statement about activity in the department, intended in a perfectly business-like way.

So, it's also possible to communicate concurrently on both the content level and the emotional level. It's a question of where the sender and receiver place the emphasis. Frictions and misunderstandings tend to arise when the sender and receiver weight the elements differently.

As a general rule, when we communicate on the content level, we are simultaneously engaged on the interactional level. We are constantly transmitting signals of how we see the other person, and ourselves.

Spontaneity

We have said that, in communication, one should be able to act deliberately and be capable of consciously choosing between the four levels. If A is able to choose between alternative behaviours, s/he has more freedom of social manoeuvre. It could be said that this comes at the cost of less spontaneity. But if A is the person who wants something from B, A will have to think what makes his or her communication more or less effective. If A has a specific role to play, such as that of a supervisor in relation to an employee, an advisor in relation to a client, a salesman relating to a customer, or a policeman relating to a person on the street, then A is someone who wants to achieve a particular purpose in relation to B. This means that s/he bears the primary responsibility for good communication. If you think that your behaviour is having little effect, the simple message is: you should be able to switch to another level of communication.

Further remarks about the 'emotional level'

- In the above example, the person instructing the secretary said: "Help me out – I'm really in a fix here because I'll be a laughing stock tomorrow if it's not ready". We called this the emotional level of communication. Such an expression on the emotional level is accompanied by a particular tone of voice, gestures and facial expression. More than that, something said on the emotional level must be accompanied by a certain tone and facial expression etc., because it's not credible without them.

We collectively call these elements of the communication 'body language' or 'non-verbal language'. Thus, it's a language that we use in addition to words. Particularly when communicating on the emotional level, it's important that the sender should use this body language and that the receiver should detect it. Feelings are communicated largely by non-verbal language. However, much non-verbal language also comes into play when you're communicating on a level other than emotional.

- In our example, the person instructing the secretary responds by saying: "Help me out – I'm really in a fix here because I'll be a laughing stock tomorrow if it's not ready". So in this case, the boss instructing the secretary responds according to his or her own feelings about the problem.

There is a second kind of remark that the person instructing the secretary can make, which we also call communication on the emotional level, and which is also attuned to the level to which the employee in the example is 'tuned'. This kind of remark shows that one recognises the feelings of the other person. For example: "You mean that you're very busy and now you feel you're being pressured". This reduces the employee's emotional intensity: s/he feels noticed. This, in itself, does not solve the problem – the rush job – but it does help to clear the air. The issue itself must still be dealt with, so in this example it would be good if the person instructing the secretary followed up with a procedural remark: "I can see that you don't like it (emotional level). Shall we take a look together and see how you can get through all that work?" (procedural level). Or, if the person instructing the secretary has no time for that now: "I can see that you're not happy with this (emotional level), shall we put our heads together next week and see how we can avoid rush jobs in our department in future?" (procedural level).

Further remarks about the 'interactional level'

- The person instructing the secretary in the example might respond by saying: "I'm sorry, I'm always barging in here with more work, when you're already up to your eyes in things to do". S/he is no longer focusing on the issue of that rush job, but is talking about how these two people behave with one another. We called this the 'interactional level' (interaction is about exchange, there is always mutual influence).

In fact, we can understand, from what the person instructing the secretary says, how he sees the employee and himself as a manager. "I see you as someone who does your work well. I see myself as someone who makes too few allowances for your interests". The person instructing the secretary is then engaging on the interactional level.

- This remark by the person instructing the secretary could also be considered in another light. It's not simply an interactional remark, but also one that explicitly discusses the relationship between the two people involved: it's communication about the communication (i.e. meta-communication). In other words, the interaction between them has been made into the content of a new conversation. It can be very useful to respond in this way.

The strength of this is that you then begin to reflect on the full picture of the influence exerted. It goes from A-to-B and from B-to-A. There's no guilty party: each one plays a role.

An interaction remark is more than just the description of this one event between A and B. One is trying to discover what it is about in general terms, to find a pattern to the mutual responses. You are, as it were, taking a step back together, to look at what's going on. Interaction remarks by A invite B to join in thinking about causes of, and solutions to an undesirable pattern.

Further remarks about the procedural level

The person instructing the secretary could also respond by saying: "Shall we take a look together and see how you can get through all that work?" S/he is now making a comment on the procedural level, i.e. not a remark about the issue itself – the rush job – but about how the issue is to be discussed.

The person instructing the secretary has, as it were, turned aside for a moment so as to be able to return to the core issue later and then (possibly) get the rush job done. The momentary side step is very effective. Sometimes it's even a prerequisite for being able to influence someone else.

How can I influence others?

If you adopt this approach, the communication takes place at a procedural level by first establishing the basis for an attempt to influence the other. The mistake we often make when we want to influence others is to work only at the content level, with arguments and even more arguments. By establishing a good procedure, A and B will communicate better and interact better. And, in the long run, this approach also brings benefits at the content level.

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