

# Can we talk, academia?

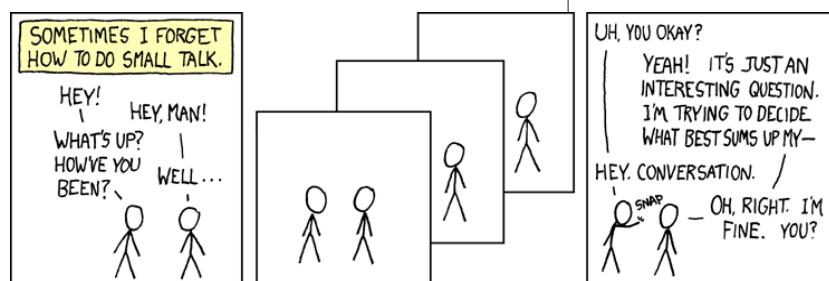
**MIND MATTERS is a campaign of the IMP, IMBA, GMI and the Max Perutz Labs with the aims to raise awareness about mental health in academia, destigmatize mental health issues and getting help, inform about professional help services on campus and encourage mental health self-care.**

“How are you?” “Fine” is what I usually answer. But is this really how I feel? Sometimes yes, but often not. I might feel stressed out, or tired or intimidated by all the things I should know, but don't know, or anxious about the challenges ahead. In a work context, I find it often difficult to speak about my emotions. However, while I can tell my friends how I really feel and they try to empathize with my problems, they don't understand the specific issues and the pressure that are part of the academic environment.

For me, it's important to have open conversations with colleagues, as it not only promotes a supportive, collaborative atmosphere but also serves as a reminder that none of us need to face our challenges alone. So I count myself lucky that I always found amazing colleagues to whom I can tell how I really feel and listen to their stories in return. But I have to admit that communicating is not always easy.

In this newsletter we will discuss about the importance of good communication for our well-being at the workplace and identify how to improve our communication skills. **In the end, a good working environment relies on good communication between all involved** - be that about general issues or personal ones, conversations between colleagues, or between supervisor and student.

▼ Comic from <https://xkcd.com/222/>



**MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS 2023**

### Communication...

What makes humans human? The one thing that separates humans from animals is their ability to not only react to each other's actions, but to anticipate and empathize, i.e. to put themselves in another person's shoes<sup>1</sup>. This is what makes communication between humans so powerful - since we can understand each other on an empathic level, we can anticipate how our partner will feel and react in a conversation. In a way, this gives us power over the other - and we can decide whether our communication can be uplifting, neutral or destructive.

### ... as a helpful factor

Communication is crucial for human survival, both physically and mentally. E.g. it helps us navigate stressful situations. There is nothing better when we experience stress than to find a friend or a colleague to talk about it, to vent, and let go.

### ....as a stress factor

However, it's important to acknowledge that communication can also be a source of stress, such as when it involves pressure, power dynamics, criticism, or belittlement. This is especially relevant in a work context. The same message conveyed in different ways can have completely different impacts, whether it's constructive or destructive criticism, for example.

### How can we better communicate with one another?

Surprisingly, it's listening, not talking, that holds the key to effective communication because it allows us to truly understand others, their needs, and their perspectives. By actively listening, misunderstandings and conflicts can be prevented, whether it's between a supervisor and a student or

among colleagues. Furthermore, when a friend or a colleague approaches you with a problem, they often don't necessarily need active advice from us, but rather an open ear that listens.

Active listening is a valuable skill that can enhance communication and relationships in various settings, not just leadership roles. It involves being fully present, empathizing with the speaker, and understanding their perspective by focusing on not just the content but also the emotions and non-verbal cues, with the goal of creating a respectful and empathetic connection that makes the speaker feel valued and seen<sup>2</sup>.

Here's how to practice active listening effectively:

### ACTIVE LISTENING

- 1. Stay fully engaged:** Whether you're talking to a friend, coworker, or family member, give them your complete attention. Put away distractions and be present in the moment.
- 2. Show empathy:** Try to understand the speaker's feelings and perspective. Respond with empathy, showing that you care about what they're saying.
- 3. Ask open-ended questions:** Encourage more meaningful conversations by asking open-ended questions that invite deeper discussions.
- 4. Be patient and non-judgmental:** Create a safe environment for open dialogue by avoiding interruptions and judgment. Let the speaker express themselves without fear of criticism.
- 5. Reflect and clarify:** Summarize what you've heard to confirm your understanding and show that you value their thoughts and feelings.

If you try this, you will see the quality of your conversation increases and you might realize that in many situations, listening is already more than enough.

Effective communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, but it's not always as straightforward as we might think. Sometimes, what we intend to convey doesn't quite match what the listener interprets. For instance, a friendly suggestion could be misperceived as criticism, or a simple message might be lost in translation due to cultural differences. Each of us has undoubtedly experienced the frustrations of communication mishaps at some point in our lives. Miscommunication can be a source of interpersonal problems and, in many cases, can lead to psychological stress.

*“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said.”*

PETER DRUCKER

Friedemann Schulz von Thun developed his "four-sides model" to illustrate the complexity of human communication and explain the origin of misunderstandings. It posits that every message has four dimensions or "sides": the factual information (the content), the self-revelation (what the speaker reveals about themselves), the relationship (how the speaker perceives their relationship with the listener), and the appeal (what the speaker wants from the listener). Depending on which side(s) of the model are emphasized, messages can be interpreted in multiple ways. Understanding that different people may focus on different sides of the message helps in clarifying and tailoring communication<sup>3</sup>.

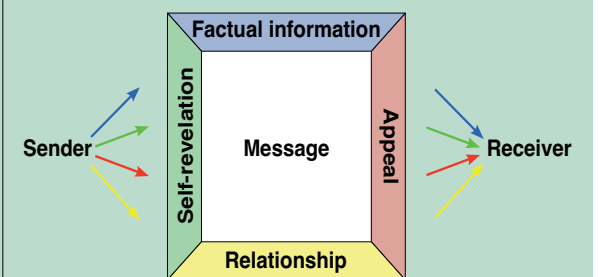
To understand the “four sides” of a message, here is an example message from everyday work life:

*“I will continue working on our project over the weekend.”*

- 1. The first side = Factual content:** I will continue working on our project over the weekend.
- 2. The second side = Self-revelation:** I want to complete this project as quickly as possible.
- 3. The third side = Relationship:** Positive: I like you and I want to support you by working over the weekend. Negative: I don't like you and rather work on the project alone over the weekend.
- 4. The fourth side = Appeal:** You should also work on our project over the weekend.

In this specific example, if the message recipient places particular emphasis on the appeal and relationship aspects of a message, it can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and their work-life balance, even when the sender's sole intention was to inform their colleague about their weekend plans (i.e., the factual content). In light of this, it is crucial to have an understanding of the complexity of communication to mitigate potential adverse effects on one's well-being.

### 4-SIDES-MODEL



To illustrate how communication can be more empathetic and constructive in practice, let's now introduce the concept of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), also known as compassionate communication. NVC is a method of communication that aims to foster understanding, empathy, and connection between individuals. Developed by Marshall Rosenberg, this approach encourages individuals to express their needs and feelings in a nonjudgmental and nonviolent manner, while also actively listening to others with empathy and compassion<sup>4</sup>.

By using this approach, conflicts can be resolved peacefully, relationships can be strengthened, and a sense of mutual respect and understanding can be cultivated. Here are some key points how to practice nonviolent communication:

## NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

- 1. Observation:** Describe the situation or behavior objectively, without judgment or evaluation.
- 2. Feeling:** Express your emotions in response to the observation, using "I" statements to avoid blame.
- 3. Need:** Identify the unmet needs or values that are contributing to your feelings.
- 4. Request:** Clearly and positively request a specific action or behavior that would meet your needs.

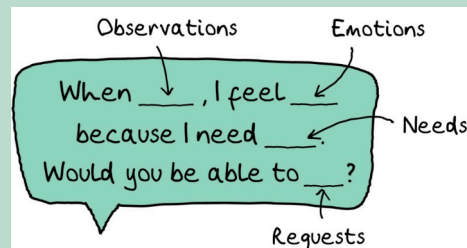


IMAGE FROM [HTTPS://WWW.DAVE-BAILEY.COM/BLOG/NONVIOLENT-COMMUNICATION](https://www.dave-bailey.com/blog/nonviolent-communication)

NVC is a valuable approach in the workplace, applicable to areas such as conflict prevention and resolution, team communication, leadership, negotiations, and many more, with the overarching goal of fostering effective, empathetic, and respectful interactions to enhance productivity and relationships.

Now that we have explored the fundamentals of NVC, let's shift our focus to the application of this principle in the context of academia, i.e. for providing feedback. In academia we and our work are constantly evaluated. It is clear that our boss, our mentor or our colleagues will provide feedback, i.e. criticize our work, but how they do so can range from appreciative and con-

structive, to aggressive and destructive comments. That this of course has a tremendous effect on our mental health should come as no surprise. Being aware of this and acting accordingly can significantly improve the quality of our lives and work.

Giving feedback using NVC could look like the following:

Instead of saying,

*"You're always late for meetings, and it's really annoying,"*

you could use NVC to say:

*"I've noticed that you were late for the last two meetings (Observation), and it makes me feel frustrated (Feeling) because I value punctuality and effective time management (Need). Could you please make an effort to be on time for our future meetings? Additionally, how can we work together to ensure that we meet on time? (Request)"*

By following these steps, feedback becomes less critical and more about understanding and meeting each other's needs. Using NVC in this scenario helps address the issue while focusing on the feelings, needs, and collaborative solutions, ultimately leading to more productive and respectful communication within the team.

In conclusion, active listening, the 4-sides model and NVC are valuable approaches and theories to enhance our communication skills. **Embracing and applying these communication techniques can open doors to more fulfilling professional and private relationships and successful interactions, making it well worth the effort to give them a try.**

Beyond the communication theories discussed in this newsletter, there's a whole world of other theories waiting to be explored. If you're curious, why not take a moment for a quick online search? It's time well invested in enhancing our communication skills.

**"You cannot not communicate. Every behavior is a kind of communication."**

PAUL WATZLAWICK

▼ Comic from <https://phdcomics.com/comics/archive.php?comid=1510>



WWW.PHDCOMICS.COM

## REFERENCES

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2. Rogers and Farson (1956). **Active listening**. Mockingbird Press. ISBN-13: 978-1953450258
3. Friedemann Schulz von Thun (1981). **Miteinander Reden: 1. Störungen und Klärungen: Allgemeine Psychologie der Kommunikation**. Rowohlt Verlag. ISBN 978-3-499-17489-6
4. Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD (2015). **Non-violent communication: a language of life**. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Puddle Dancer Press. ISBN 978-1-892005-28-1

## TED TALK

**5 ways to listen better** from Julian Treasure, 2011

[https://www.ted.com/talks/julian\\_treasure\\_5\\_ways\\_to\\_listen\\_better](https://www.ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_5_ways_to_listen_better)

## PODCASTS



▲ "Think Fast, Talk Smart" is a podcast from the Stanford Graduate School of Business with Matt Abrahams an expert in strategic communication giving insights in how to become a better communicator at work.



▲ An episode of the podcast "fixable" from leadership coaches Anna Morriss and Frances Frei in which they talk with expert guest Clair Hugh Johnson about having good meetings. One important form of communication in the workplace.

## OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out our weekly posters and newsletters, and get inspired by our fantastic speakers:

Over Zoom:

- 24.10. Thomas Reinbacher

- 30.10. Britta Hölzel

- 07.11. Nina Junker

Advertised on this weeks awareness poster - art as a coping strategy

- 02.11. Self expression with paints 17:00 at the IMP cafeteria

For more information, check your inbox and the info screens regularly!

We are looking forward to seeing many of you at our next events!

