MIDDLE WAY EDUCATION

October, 2017

Communications

Good communication is essential in organizational systems that require collaboration. This guide is a work in progress.

Two Fundamentals

Rely on Emptiness (Shunyata) — The view of emptiness of self and other supports the creation of open and creative communication systems. Challenges viewed through this lens appear more workable, less rigid.

See the Good (Bodhicitta) – Recognizing the intrinsic Buddhanature in all beings helps that goodness arise in both sides of communications. When in doubt, assume that people have a good intention and a good heart.

Basic Principles

Start with Yourself

- Self-reflection is the foundation for good communication.
- Celebrate mistakes as opportunities for learning.
- Remember that everything is dependent on countless causes and conditions. Knowing this, we accept complexity over black and white. It is impossible to trace praise or blame to a single cause.

Practice Mindful Speech and Listening

- Suspend judgment in order to truly and actively listen.
- Actively pay attention - on purpose, in the present moment.
- Allow things that are not thought through to be said without fear of judgment; Risk-free communication is essential for creativity.
- Show that you are listening with your body, facing the speaker, not fidgeting, not checking devices.
- Respect that whatever a person is saying makes sense and is valid to them.
- "Don't stir up extra dust and don't sweep anything under the rug." (Elizabeth Namgyel).
- Use the Six Points of Mindful Speech as a reference point for self-reflection: Speak slowly; Enunciate; Listen to yourself; Listen to others; Regard silence as a part of speech; Speak concisely.

Humor and Humility

- When we don't take ourselves so seriously and the ego is not seeking protection, it is less easy to become hurt. When lightness and genuine humor arise, communication is smoother.
- Don't be an upside-down pot. Practice the humility that allows new ideas to sink in.
- "Humility is the vessel that accommodates the neuroses of others. Then, having been accommodated, their neuroses are transformed. So, it is very important for us to realize that humility, gentleness, and genuineness are absolutely necessary if we are interested in working with others. And if we are not, then we are not actually practicing dharma at all." - Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
- "Reward bad behaviour with humor" — Michael Rutland, tutor to the 4th King of Bhutan

Build Community

- Have friendliness as the default.
- Recognize that people have unique and individual ways of expressing kindness, find your personal style of offering.
- Have fun. Making time for enjoying activities together helps establish camaraderie and cultivate a shared vision.
- Cultivate strong individual relationships. Each member of the group should have a connection and direct communication with each other person.
- Celebrate cultural diversity. Be gentle when you don't understand others' way of being.
- Establish clear descriptions of organizational roles and structure

Conflict and Challenge

- Don't fear conflict. Dynamic tension fuels creativity and organizational growth.
- Watch your mind. When conflicts arise, apply awareness, understanding of emptiness, buddhanature, and dependent origination to re-establish trust in other's positive intent and the workability inherent in the situation.
- Monitor for adrenaline. If you sense it arising, drop it; don't speak from it. If you cannot drop it, have an agreed upon code within the group that initiates a time out.
- Use conflict as an opportunity to connect to a greater vision. Instead of getting sucked into emotionally loaded story lines, choose to keep a larger perspective while attending precisely to the details of the conflict.
- Distribute conflicted energy. By supporting people facing challenges and conflicts in a wider group context, constricted energy can be diffused.
- Communicate openly. Open communication between seemingly non-conflicted participants is a primary support for conflict resolution. Conflict is often a result of either a) undelivered feedback or b) the organization's development occurring through only one conflict pair rather than openly through many pairs of people (Knowlan, 2007). Allowing conflicts to be shared by the group increases the workability of conflicts and challenges.

Other Best Practices

- Respect confidentiality.
- Establish channels of support in order to maintain organizational health in times of stress. For example, set up weekly check-ins on a personal level.
- Maintain awareness of the limitations of electronic communication, following these guidelines:
    1. Apply Communication Guidelines to electronic correspondences
    2. Pay particular attention to tone in order to maintain good communication
    3. Pay attention to subject headings that support organization/sorting on receiver's end
    4. Pay attention to who is being copied and avoid unnecessary distribution

Cheatsheet: Before You Meet

- Relax voice, speak from diaphragm
- Be clear abour your state of mind and listen if others say they are not feeling ready. If necessary state "I don't know if this is a good time, can I tell you if it's not going well? "
- Connect with buddhanature of self and other, assume the best in everyone
- Start authentically positive: Don't contrive positive feedback but look for it. Give very specific positive feedback, "when you did such and such, it made me feel such and such"
- Conscious Question Asking:
    You may have already covered this but...
    I am sure you've already thought of this...
    You're probably already thinking along these lines...

- At first sign of rub (if you feel that adrenaline rising):
    "Can you rephrase that?"
    "Do I sense that something here is not sitting well with you?"
    "Can you be very specific about what is bothering you?"

- Stay alert. Take note when you
    become sensitive/reactive
    manage to avert becoming sensitive/reactive
    Succeed or fail to be gentle /more inclusive

- Other good phrases/techniques
    "I'm sharing this to keep you in the loop"
    "What would be so bad if we don't do this all right now."
    Play back and then amplify

Systems and Organizations

Use Feedback in Service of Organizational Health

- Feedback is data about one's impact on another person; it is not the truth of who you are, nor a statement about your intention (Knowlan, 2006).
- Redefine feedback as an investment in the relationship.
- True communication is only possible with feedback; it refines the relationship and clarifies intention and action.
- Establish appreciative and differentiating feedback as an organizational norm (Knowlan, 2006). Appreciative feedback is meant to share data regarding appreciated impact; Differentiating feedback is meant to share data regarding unappreciated impact. Aim for a ratio of 5:1 with appreciative and differentiating feedback.
- Distinguish between the intention and the impact of your feedback on others (
- Effective feedback is information that:
  - can be heard by the receiver as evidenced by the fact that s/he does not get defensive
  - keeps the relationship intact, open and healthy, though not devoid of conflict or pain
  - validates the feedback process in future interactions rather than avoiding it because "last time it hurt so much." Further, feedback does not assume that the giver is totally right and the receiver wrong. Instead, it's an invitation to interaction and has some give-and-take to it (Porter, 1982).

Understand System and Relationship Patterns

More information about these concepts can be found in the Resources section below
- Understand the traits of organizational systems in order to cultivate a meta-level awareness that supports enriched communication.
- Develop awareness of the organization as a developing system/organism with its own needs, patterns, strategies and evolutionary possibilities (Knowlan, 2004). Becoming aware of the developmental stages of the system helps with understanding the particular roles individuals take in order to facilitate organizational growth. This understanding supports collaboration and helps keep conflicts from becoming too personal.
- Establish a matrix of person-to-person communication within a group. Form the foundation for highly inclusive communication and an open collaborative system (Knowlan, 2007) built upon a network of one-on-one relationships.
- Recognize the power of roles.
    - Utilize differences and diversity as resources vs. threats (Knowlan, 2004). In the context of healthy system development, differences in perspective create the dynamic tension necessary for the organization to meet its fullest potential.
    - Establish organizational norms that include diverse styles of expression and learning.
    - Distribute and diversify roles to support individual and system growth (Knowlan, 2004).
    - Pay attention to the role you and others take within system dynamics.
    - Utilize your role in the service of personal and organizational growth.

- Recognize patterns. Patterns that repeat on personal, interpersonal and organizational levels are sources of information and awareness. When you see a pattern in an individual, look for the pattern repeating in another person or place in the organization. Personal and organizational growth can come from paying attention to these patterns.
- Don't take it personally. Understand that healthy systems are in constant process of pressing for further differentiation and range. This dynamic is manifested through the people connected to the system.
- Don't strive for perfection. Imperfection and learning go hand in hand.

Resources: A Collection in Progress

Following are a number of resources to support communication at Middle Way Schools and in the Middle Way Education Community:

Dharma Resources
- Boundaries vs. Barriers- Pema Chodron http://integral-options.blogspot.com/2006/11/pema-chodron-on-barriers-vs-boundaries.html
- The Art of Communicating- Thich Nhat Hanh

Psychology/Neuroscience Resources
- This is Your Brain on Communication- Uri Hasson https://www.ted.com/talks/uri_hasson_this_is_your_brain_on_communication/discussion
- The Power of Vulnerability - Brene Brown
- https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability
- The Information – James Gleick https://www.amazon.com/Information-History-Theory-Flood/dp/1400096235 a thoughtful and provocative exploration of the big ideas of the modern era: Information, communication, and information theory.

Systems of Communication
- Disagreement as Practice, an article by MWE advisor Anja Hartmann www.levekunst.com/disagreement-as-practice/
- Creating a High Feedback Culture- Amina Knowlan www.matrixleadership.org/articles/creating-a-high-feedback-culture
- Roles People Play in Groups- Ann Porteus web.stanford.edu/group/resed/resed/staffresources/RM/training/grouproles.html
- How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation – Robert Kegan www.amazon.com/How-Talk-Change-Work-Transformation/dp/1511383631
- Giving and Receiving Feedback- Larry Porter www.nspe.org/sites/default/files/resources/pdfs/mentoring/Effective_Feedback_for_Mentoring.pdf

Conflict Resolution
- Redefining Conflict- Amina Knowlan http://matrixleadership.org/articles/matrix-radically-redefines-conflict
- Nonviolent Communication https://www.cnvc.org/learn/nvc-foundations

Personalities in Community
- 16 Personalities

https://www.16personalities.com
- How the Enneagram Works
https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/how-the-enneagram-system-works/

Best Practices
- Nonprofit Best Practices for Communication
http://www.prnewsonline.com/Assets/File/PRN_Guide_Best_Practices_Nonprofit
_Communications.pdf