



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 Buddhature 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.

Practice Mindful Speech and Listening

- Goal is to pay attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally
- Allow things that are not thought through to be said without fear of judgment; Risk-free communication is essential for creativity.
- Suspend judgment in order to truly and actively listen. Since everything is dependent, it is impossible to trace blame to a single cause.
- 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. If necessary state "I don't know if this is a good time, maybe I'll hit a wall or need to go, can I tell you if it's not going well?"
- 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." (Namgyel, 1997).
- Use the Six Points of Mindful Speech as a reference point for self-reflection.
 1. Speak slowly
 2. Enunciate clearly
 3. Listen to yourself
 4. Listen to others
 5. Regard silence as a part of speech
 6. 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, the Buddhist teachings, at all- Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
- "Reward bad behaviour with humor" – Michael Rutland, tutor to the 4th King of Bhutan

Build Community

- Friendliness as the default. Warmth is enlivening and essential in healthy organizations.
- Recognize that people have unique and individual ways of expressing tenderness, find your personal style of offering.
- Have fun. Making time for enjoying activities together helps establish camaraderie and cultivate a shared vision.
- Cultivating strong individual relationships. Each member of the group has a connection and direct communication with each other person.
- Celebrate cultural diversity. Be gentle when you don't understand others' way of being.
- Build trust through:
 - open pathways of direct communication
 - systems for receiving and offering support
 - 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.
- Remember there is a choice. 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 calls JUST about how we are doing? Or can we combine with our weekly calls on what we are doing.
- 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
- If necessary state "I don't know if this is a good time, maybe I'll hit a wall or need to go, can I tell you if it's not going well?"
- Connect with buddhanature of self and other, assume 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" "I'm really glad you pushed this forward...." Or "I totally trust you to do this"
- 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?"
 - You don't need to change your view necessarily, but acknowledge the other's
- Stay alert. Take note when you
 - Keep note of when you become sensitive/reactive
 - Keep note of when 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

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.

Use Feedback in Service of Organizational Health

- Redefine feedback as an investment in the relationship. True communication is only possible with feedback; it refines the relationship and clarifies intention and action. 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).
- 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 (Knowlan, 2006).
- 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).
- Use techniques to offer differentiating feedback that aligns closely to intention and allows space for true communication (3 Paces to a Lead, NVC, etc.)

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

Systems of Communication

- Disagreement as Practice, an article by MWE advisor Anja Hartmann
www.levelkunst.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