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[THE COMMFLOWSYSTEM]

A structured approach to understanding and improving interpersonal communication

Contents

Introduction: Communication is like keyhole surgery (you should be trained before you try it)

Today's advanced medical techniques include a concept called "keyhole surgery". The principle is simple: The surgeon makes a tiny cut in the patient's skin, inserts a medical tool, performs the surgery - for example working on a patella in an athlete's knee - removes the tool and stitches or even glues up the small incision. The advantages are that the surgery can be done more quickly, the wound is more manageable and heals more quickly.

What does this have to do with communication? How can this be even remotely related to the world of words, language, logic, concepts and culture?

I thought of this analogy recently when thinking about how communication between 2 individuals actually works.

In order for any communication to work at all, both persons have to share a lot of things in common; a common language for once! But a common language is not enough. Elements of a common culture are required as well, as is a shared context for the communication.

Only when language, culture, context and quite a number of other things line up, a coherent communications flow can begin. One could say we have "Comm-Unity" and a compatible "model" of the world.

If, however, a shared model is not in place, when "Comm-Unity" has NOT been established, one can see a lot of misunderstanding. And while these misunderstandings are often funny, they are more often very frustrating and sometimes even tragic.

Again, you might say, what does this have to do with "keyhole surgery"?

The analogy is that - when we communicate -, we are actually opening a "keyhole" into the "World Model" of the person we are attempting to communicate with. We are "inserting" the "surgical tools" of our communication (words, body language, speed and tone of voice, outer appearance, pheromones, choice of setting, mode of communication) into the "World Model" of the other person. But we don't really see the "inside" of the other person. We can't. All we see is the response we get, and that has to be interpreted by us using our own World Model. In order for any communication to flow, we have to make a lot of assumptions on the mental "anatomy" of the communications partner. And these assumptions, and sometimes a lack of awareness of the complete scope of our messages are the reasons that so much communication leads to misunderstandings.

So, that is how "keyhole surgery" and communications can be compared. The huge difference between keyhole surgery and communication (apart from the fact that it is probably not a very strong analogy) is that it is usually performed by highly trained

surgeons who spend years and years in university, and many more years practicing as residents in a hospital before they get to cut anyone open. The risks are simply too high, keyhole or not, a lot of things can go wrong and we want our surgeons to be the best.

With communication, however, most people are untrained and unaware of how communication even works! And therefore, many of us are quite unsuccessful in getting our points across successfully in many situations.

This book is intended to capture essential ideas about the art and science of communication. To create a Communications Flow System (CommFlowSystem) of training that provides a structured approach to become a master of communication at all levels.

The fundamental axioms of the CommFlowSystem will be based on the following categories:

(1) Community …
how to establish common ground / rapport with the target audience or culture earning the right to establish a flow.

(2) Intent …
how to be clear on the purpose and intended outcome(s) of the communication, (inform, inspire, entertain, educate, call to action, ...).

(3) Coherence …
how to apply ALL means of communication available (body language, setting, medium, language, tools, logic, continuity, etc.) in a consistent fashion.

(4) Feedback
how to solicit and read feedback at all levels (important since the meaning of any communication is determined by the feedback you obtain).

(5) Flexibility
how to adjust to different mental models and approaches to maintain flexibility, respond to feedback and avoid disrupting the flow

(6) Influence
how to apply an understanding of the mind to influence the flow in a certain direction (calming, persuading, objection handling, etc.)

(7) Clarity
how to achieve utmost simplicity and how to remove confusion, clutter and waste in your communication

The main goal of this book is to distill my personal experience as well as 100's of books read into an essential guide that will help anyone to become a better communicator.

Chapter 1: The brain is stupid - Don't be fooled by it

Our brain is a very advanced machine. It has evolved over millions of years. It operates at amazing speed and can store and retrieve huge amounts of information. The brain justly gets a lot of praise for being the main driving factor for putting our species on top of the food chain. Well done, brain. But in spite of its great performance, the brain is essentially "stupid". Just like a digital computer, the brain is essentially a sophisticated data processing machine and will faithfully execute any programs that are fed into it, through nature or nurture.

"Well", you are probably thinking, "I am not sure I agree with this! How can the brain, the main seat of our intelligence be stupid? What is this guy thinking?" Of course it's a gross exaggeration to get your attention. But let me explain.

The brain is essentially a collection of biological and chemical mechanisms that have evolved to provide the most appropriate response to a certain stimulus. The brain basically operates to continuously answer ONE main question.

"Is the stimulus I am receiving at this time a threat, or a benefit?"

This basic question is constantly, rapidly and subconsciously evaluated by all senses, continuously compared with stored information, and all other sensations and, if the answer is conclusive (it's a threat / it's a benefit), a number of mechanisms are brought into action that trigger or modify our behavior (fight, flight, excitement, sadness, etc.). These behavioral triggering and modification mechanisms are immensely complex and involve 1000's of different chemicals and bio-electrical systems.

Truly, the brain is an amazing machine. And it does its job really well. But, like I said, it's essentially stupid. The brain and will continue to simply execute the inherent or learned programs, and it continues to optimize its response machine based on new inputs, experiences and training to further optimize its reflexes and automated responses. And the most important insight of recent scientific discovery about these responses and decision is: This process is neither purely emotional nor purely rational. **It's both** emotional and rational at the same time!

There is an entire region of the brain, the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC), whose job it is to constantly take ALL INPUT, emotions, experiences and rational options and integrate them into a **positive emotion to act**. And it's that positive e**MOTION** that provides the **MOTIV**ation to act and decide; automatically and in split seconds, but always based on the **whole experience**. So, in short, no emotion, no decision.
(see note at bottom of chapter 1).

As a consequence, since we do have a wealth of emotions we can integrate with our rational thoughts in sub second time, one thing the brain does extremely well, is to "jump to conclusions". Often, even a partial or very fuzzy stimulus is enough to trigger a full scale physical or emotional response. In a life and death situation, even the partial sight of a tiger should be enough to trigger the flight response. In a normal everyday communications situation, this sudden triggering of a full response to a partial trigger is a root cause of much conflict and misunderstanding. What is good for basic survival of the species is not always good for excellence in communication.

So we need to be careful not to be constantly "fooled" by the brains trained programs and "auto-triggers". We need to respect the constant automatic evaluation against the "threat/reward" criterion when we communicate. We need to be aware that the brain is a very sophisticated pattern recognition machine. A whole set of neural structures and a chemical called Dopamine is specifically built to look for patterns, try to predict what happens next, and will reward the person with a release of Dopamine, which generates "pleasure".

This pattern recognition machine is the main driver behind learning. The more unexpected the positive outcome is, the more Dopamine is released. And the brain will look for patterns even when the event is completely random. That's when the brain is starting to "make up stories", and we need the help of the rational mind and our connection to the real world to "make sense" of it all. (Note: there is a lot of scientific literature on this, in case you want to learn more about this)

When dealing with a real world stimulus, the brain is usually very reliable and allows us to react with blazing speed. It does this by evaluation of the external stimulus against a stored response program based on patterns. A good example is how we train our brain as well as our muscle reflexes to play better and faster tennis, or how to drive a car, without paying much attention to the mechanical actions needed to steer, shift, brake etc. But take care! The brain also reflexively responds to communication in a highly automated way.

This tendency to "auto-respond" gets even more severe when the body is flooded with one of the main chemicals such as adrenalin, that is preparing the body for an emergency response. This is the reason why you need to be fully awake and aware of the responses you are generating in your audience. What you say does not matter. Only what is being heard, and what reaction you are generating.

Using these auto-triggers, the brain's patterns and conditioned reflexes can lead us into a response that is entirely based on a constructed model of the world, not the real world at all. As a matter of fact, many of our responses to communication are entirely based on assumptions and the brain's speculations regarding the threat/benefit value of a future stimulus. And since the brain is constantly using this

model, these assumptions, and the associated reactions can be very wrong or misguided.

Let me repeat. The brain is stupid. Its internal mechanisms cannot differentiate between a "real world" stimulus and a modeled or imagined stimulus. Just like a real world physical input (such as the smell of a bowl of fresh strawberries and cream can make your mouth water and make you want to sit down for a snack), communication in the form of images, words, sentences, and sounds will invoke an IDENTICAL response in the brain.

The brain cannot differentiate between the fear invoked by the sight of a physical Tarantula spider (if you are afraid of spiders) and the fear invoked by the sight of a picture of a Tarantula, or the fear invoked by the mentioning of the word "tarantula". It is the same chemicals that are being released into the body, the same response being triggered, and it needs a conscious effort of our awareness (conscious mind) to manage the triggered response. This is also true when we try to negate the image with words. If you, for example, say "do not think of a Tarantula", the brain cannot help but evoke the image, and therefore the response of the spider. The brain cannot process negatives.

What does this mean for communication? It is essential that we understand the brain at this level to optimize our communications. Here are a few things to remember:

(1) The brain is a very advanced threat/reward evaluation machine. Try to consider this before you initiate or respond to communication because this happens automatically in any interaction.
(2) The brain has/makes a model of the world, and will respond to communication with the same mechanisms it uses for responses to physical stimulus. So, when we communicate, we are basically connecting two world models based on abstract concepts such as words. As we can see in everyday life, this does not always work the way we intend it to work, unless we respect the world model mapping of the person we are interacting with.
(3) The brain cannot process negatives. All concepts/images invoked in communication will produce a response. Even if you bracket it with negatives such as "don't", "but", "never", etc., the brain always scans and processes for the basic concepts that it can relate to phyisical stimulus.

In later chapters I will go into more detail on examples on how the brain operates on information. Just let this short introduction be a reminder that "we cannot not communicate". Every message we send, we send at multiple levels including tone of voice and body language, and every message will always be interpreted by the receiving brain. Keep this in mind the next time you are in the middle of a misunderstanding. You might be more responsible than you thought.

Chapter 2: The social brain. A simple way to understand how to structure an interaction for success

In the last chapter, I explored a bit how the brain is actually a highly evolved pattern recognition machine that continuously evolves external stimuli in terms of threat vs. benefit to come up with the most appropriate response. This is also true of any social interaction and communication. The part of the brain, the "social brain" so to speak, that is mostly responsible for this is called the limbic system. The limbic system "prefers" to evaluate any situation, and therefore communication according to the following 5 criteria:

(1) Status
(2) Certainty
(3) Autonomy
(4) Relationship
(5) Fairness

These 5 criteria are easily remembered with the acronym SCARF, and although they are listed from 1 to 5, they always get evaluated concurrently, not necessarily one after the other. Let's drill down a bit.

(1) **Status** means that the brain, (which is always looking for ways to increase security, power and ways to have fun) will scan each situation and immediately evaluate the situation in terms of its impact to the social standing of the person. If the status is threatened, you get a threat-response, and not much clear and unimpeded communication after that.
(2) **Certainty** means that the brain will always check if the situation is stable or at least reasonably predictable. If things look too flaky, again, you get the threat response and the listening process pretty much stops at that point.
(3) The same mechanism is then applied to **Autonomy**, to evaluate how much flexibility is available in the situation. When people feel "cornered", they again will be forced into a threat response by the social brain.
(4) The same is true when **relationships** are threatened, or even if things seem to break the common sense around (5) **fairness**.

You should easily be able to see how this automatic evaluation by the social brain can stop a conversation dead in its tracks. This is even made more complex when we are trying to communicate across cultures, where questions of status and relationship can be vastly more complicated that in our fairly homogenous western culture. The same applies when we are communicating under pressure.

An excellent in depth treatment of this subject around the SCARF model and the Social Brain can be found in David Rock's article for the NeuroLeadership Journal. Here is the link to David's excellent work.

http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf

So, what can you take away from this for your everyday communications situations?

A) Remember the SCARF acronym

B) When you begin a communication, try to think about how you can acknowledge or reaffirm the persons status in the situation, how you can create a stable and predictable environment, how you can give the person you are communicating with more options to respond, how you can tie into the community and culture of the individual to increase the feeling of relatedness and, last but not least, how you can maintain fairness in the situation.

Just following the 2 points above has helped me almost immediately after learning about the SCARF approach. As I continue to develop this book, I will also add specific examples on how to apply this to everyday situations such as giving performance feedback to an employee, or trying to influence a purchase decision, or even when having a simple chat at dinner with an old friend.

Chapter 3: The Seven keys to communication flow. (Becoming a communication black belt)

In the past it was quite common for most everyone to get trained in a martial art at some level. Be it the use of blades or fire arms, be it the use of your hands and feet, or sticks or stones, getting trained in attack and defense was quite common. Tournaments were available to showcase your fighting skills. Thank goodness, we don't need to expect to be engaged in armed conflict or duels as much as in the past, and the martial arts have largely become a recreational activity. So even today, many people still go through formal training in a martial art, acquiring "belts" in Judo, Karate, Kendo or other disciplines. Yet, while in today's age we don't any longer tend to throw down the gauntlet or meet at dawn to settle our disagreement in duels, we are constantly and increasingly engaged in communication "wars" and "duels". We are fighting for attention, struggling towards persuasion or decisions, and are generally stumbling from misunderstanding to misunderstanding, both at a professional and private level.

It has been very surprising to me to see that there is no martial art level training is available for communications excellence. No general test for "communication fitness" Yes, granted, there are 1000's of training programs available for the individual sub-disciplines of communication: Books and classes on how to sell, how to persuade, how to present, how to negotiate, how to train, how to coach, etc. And surely some of these programs are being run, written or taught by true masters of their art.

However, the surprising thing is, there is no "belt system" available, no system of global schools or "DoJos", no lifelong master-apprentice relationships, etc. How can it be that one of our essential skills that elevates us above the rest of the animal kingdom is so grossly under-represented in the training field?

Having observed this lack of structured "belt-system" approach throughout my entire career, I had begun collecting my thoughts quite a while ago in the late 1990ies. Then, recently, I discussed the idea again at a dinner in Palo Alto, and, after received quite a lot of encouragement, I considered it time to try to create such a structured communications learning system. The name I have chosen is the CommFlowSystem, to denote the fact that this should be about establishing smooth communication flows. But the name is surely not the most significant element of the idea, and it might change again as I receive feedback on my approach.

The main idea is to aggregate and simplify the different aspects of communication around 7 key areas. These 7 areas act as "keys" to communication "locks" or barriers to flow. It is not enough to have only one key. Any communication interaction usually requires us to use most - if not all - of these keys at the same time, to fully "unlock" the gates of understanding and agreement. Most of the time, many of us use these keys intuitively. But many times, when communication breaks down, we don't really know why we cannot get our point across. It could well be that we are not aware which specific communication locks have not been opened.

The seven key areas are:

(1) **Community**, or how to establish common ground with the target audience
(2) **Intent**, or how to choose the right tools for the purpose and intended outcome(s) of the communication
(3) **Coherence**, or how to apply ALL means of communication available in a consistent fashion
(4) **Clarity**, or how to remove confusion, clutter and waste in your communication
(5) **Feedback**, or how to establish a bi-directional flow in the communication
(6) **Flexibility**, or how to maintain flexibility in the communication to achieve flow
(7) **Influence**, or how to change the state of the communication in the desired direction

The next 7 chapters will drill down into each of the areas to explain why the key is important to establish a communications flow and a few tips and tricks in each area.

Chapter 4: Community

Community is the first of the 7 keys of the CommFlowSystem I would like to address. As a reminder, the 7 keys are Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, Flexibility, and Influence.

At this point you are probably asking. Why 7 keys, and not 5 or 10? Why these names? The answer is fairly simple. I like the number 7. It's not quite 10, but substantially more than 3. And it gives me enough wiggle room to put the main communication aspects into the most appropriate chapter. Just like a belt system in Karate, there is a finite number of belts (keys), but an infinite level of skill you can achieve once you have achieved the black belt certification which proves you have mastered all the basics. In the CommFlowSystem, the equivalent of a Black Belt is being able to use all 7 keys in a conscious and methodical manner to unlock the gates of understanding and agreement.

Why "Community"? I chose this term because it has a very related word root with Communication itself. What we need to establish "comm-u-nication", is Comm-Unity, which means a common basis upon which to communicate in the first place.

We often forget this and take things for granted. Once of the first mistakes we make in communication is the assumption that our communication partners (the audience), is like us. As a matter of fact, very many times the audience is entirely un-like us, and if we make too many assumptions about "like-ness", they will dis-like us.

We all have experienced situations where communication flows easily. This is very often the case in a group of people that know one-another well, that have a common language, a common cultural bias, that share a context such as an event and that have the ability to perceive the full range of communications including body language, pheromones, tone of voice, appearance etc. When these parameters line up, we often hear the term "rapport" as in, "they are having a good rapport with x or y". In the case of good acquaintances, this often even leads to a form of "mind reading" where one person is finishing the sentences of the other person.

In many cases where communication fails or partially breaks down, we have failed to establish rapport, and in extreme cases, we even treat the audience in a way that provides our social brain with ample proof that it should trigger a threat response and reject you and your communication. (Go back to chapter 2 to read up on the Social Brain and the SCARF principle)

Here is a checklist of things to do before you initiate any communication, verbal or written. Try this out, and see how it will improve your communication success. (Note: This chapter is written with a fairly western bias towards culture and behavior. I am fully aware there are vast differences in other cultures but I have chosen to keep things focused for purposes of brevity)

Here is the Comm-Unity Checklist for preparing your communication. Check as many as you can and try to make this your second nature over time to unlock this gate of understanding and agreement. Even if you are not speaking/communicating 1:1, think about the "average" aspect of your community.

( ) Try to put yourself into the shoes of your audience. What is their background, their cultural bias, their purpose of being in the place they are in, their current situation, etc.
( ) What do you have in common with your audience? (Same language, culture, school, background, degree, associations, home town, …)
( ) What is personality style of the audience? (Thinking/data oriented, feeling/emotion oriented, action/results oriented, outgoing, quiet)
( ) What do you know about the culture of your audience (Country, language, religion, traditions)

If you have a good knowledge of the above areas, think about how you want to structure your communication up front. If you are walking into a communication situation "blind", try to establish as much common ground as possible before you engage.

Here are some examples:
In a public speech: Understand the agenda (what content came before, what content comes after your contribution). Understand the audiences intent of being here and try to engage the audience in some form of dialog as the first thing you do. For example ask for a show of hands on questions like: "How many of you are from this town?"

In a 1:1 direct face-to-face communication: Understand what the person has just finished doing and will do after you are done with the talk/chat/interview. Ask questions up front, before you jump into the middle of the dialog. Watch for common language (abbreviations, jargon, technical terms) and try to match the pace and manner of their speech.

On the phone: Ask if this is a good time to speak. Ask if talking on the phone is appropriate or if another form of communication is more appropriate. Share what you know about the person, "I hear you are just back from vacation".,etc.

Try this out the next time you start a communication. Especially when you are in a time of conflict. If you do this preparation well, you will see amazing effects just from a few minutes of mentally "walking in the shoes" of your audience.

Chapter 5: Intent

Let's assume that Key One (Community) has been successfully used to unlock the first gate of understanding and agreement. You have established rapport with your audience (they are at ease, they are not using aggressive or rejecting motions, there is a level of mirror body language, etc.) and you have a good handle on where they are coming from and where they are going.

The second key to understanding and agreement (Note: this does not imply an order in terms of which gate has to be opened first) is the gate called "Intent".

What I mean by intent is that we should be crystal clear on what we are trying to get out of the communication. It can be a mix of any of the intentions listed below:

- **Relax** .. calm the waves, smooth tension and take aggressive potential out
- **Socialize** .. have a interaction without agenda or pre-set goals
- **Interview** .. try to obtain as much information as possible from the interaction
- **Inform** ... provide the audience with information relevant to their context
- **Give feedback** .. provide the audience with feedback on a program, paper, idea
- **Challenge** .. be a devil's advocate or a critic and find loopholes in a line of thinking or writing
- **Moderate** .. be a coach or moderator to help others communicate better
- **Educate** ... transfer knowledge to the audience (this implies practical examples / testing)
- **Inspire** ... provide the audience with a vision for excellence and inspire them to follow a cause
- **Motivate** .. provide the audience with reasons to act or behave in a specific way
- **Convince** .. provide the audience with compelling reason to make a decision or change their mind

As you can see from the list above, there are many different intentions in an interaction, and certainly, we can move from one intention to the next in the same conversation. We should be aware of the following factors when dealing with the key of intention:

- Make sure both parties are informed about the intention. Maybe you can see the conflict when one person seeks to convince, when the other person seeks to socialize, or when the intent of inspiration meets an audience primed to challenge.
- Make sure that you understand the different communication models involved when setting up the communication, for example, when you are trying to educate, make sure you have means of checking if the education has actually been effective. When you are trying to motivate, make sure you have a clear

call to action that you can check on later, etc.

As an audit, for example, after you have tried to convince someone, you can even follow this checklist to see what you can do better next time:

( )   Audience relaxed and settled in?
( )   Enough time given to socialize and establish rapport?
( )   Question asked up front to establish flow?
( )   Relevant information given about purpose and context of interaction?
( )   Feedback given to a response of the audience (Active Listening)
( )   Challenged the assumptions / information given for logic / consistency
        (in a non-aggressive way)
( )   Moderated a conflict by looking at both sides of the argument and focusing
        on an outcome
( )   Transferred useful knowledge to the audience including practical examples
( )   Provide the audience with a vision for excellence or inspires them to follow a
        cause or ideal
( )   Provide the audience with reasons to act or behave in a specific way
( )   Convince the audience with compelling reason to make a decision or
        change their mind

Try it out. I bet you will discover that many times when we experience a communication break-down, it was because we failed to unlock the "Intent" gate to understanding and agreement.

Chapter 6: Coherence

The third gate to understanding and agreement I want to explore after the brief discussion of community and intent is the concept of coherence.

I chose the word coherence to encompass a number of important concepts including but not limited to:

Consistency ... sticking with a line of reasoning, with certain agreed upon terminology, etc.
Continuity ... an extension of consistency in the time dimension, i.e. picking up where one left off earlier
Cohesion .. the concept of presenting facts, words and sentences that "make sense" and fit together

A number of other concepts such as integrity, and credibility also fit into this category as well, but I have no intention to be complete or scientificly accurate in this description. The main concept behind coherence is that it is easier to get to understanding, and therefore to agreement if we present our line of thinking in a consistent, continuous and cohesive way. This might seem like a "no-brainer", but next time you listen so someone, try to rate them on a scale from 1 to 10 on how coherent you think their presentation was. It's actually quite amazing how much clutter and incoherent babble passes for conversation or dialogue these days. It literally seems like most people start talking or writing to figure out what they want to say "in flight". When this happens to you, you will notice.

Here are a number of tips and best practices to keep in mind to unlock this gate to understanding and agreement:

- Remember that communication happens at multiple levels. While we mostly tend to use verbal communication (spoken or written) we often tend to ignore that the non-verbal signals we send tend to influence the credibility or valuation of what we communicate. The non-verbal signals sometimes even negate the spoken or written word, i.e. your body language will completely betray your intentions to a skilled observer.
- Remember that the medium is the message (an old communication rule). Delivering a personal message on an impersonal medium like email just is not very coherent. Try to leave a voice mail instead, for example.
- Remember to set context for your communication. Do not assume that your audience knows about your jargon, the history of the subject, the decisions made in the past, etc. Establishing the context will help to achieve coherence of your message.
- Try to stay consistent with the facts discovered or decided with the first 2 gates (Community and Intent). If you know about the culture and community aspects of your audience, and if you have communicated your intent, stay consistent with that model and try not to "sell" in a socialization context, or to socialize to much in an education context

- Do not forget about the circumstances surrounding your communication. Where you communicate is important. How you are dressed, if you show up on time, if you properly set an agenda, greet everyone in the meeting etc., are all important factors to consider if you want to be perceived as "coherent". Perception IS reality.
- Remember storytelling from your own childhood. Every story ever told had a beginning, a middle, and an end. And usually the story line of the most successful stories ever told can be boiled down to a very simple core. When you communicate, try to have a clear beginning, a clear middle, and a clear end, and you will do miracles in terms of improving your coherence.

The exercise I would like you to go through over the next couple of weeks is to observe your perception of the communications and dialogs you are involved in. How coherent do they seem? How is your understanding and agreement level in more coherent situations? I'd love to hear your feedback and will be happy to answer questions and give tips.

Chapter 7: Clarity

A lot of people are "naturals" in communication. They easily unlock the gates of community, intent and coherence in their discourse and, above all, they are clear in their communication. Clarity is a key prerequisite for being understood, and for reaching true agreement. Yet, although many people would agree with the importance of "clarity" in communication, it seems to be very hard to achieve. Why is that?

I believe the key reason why lots of communication is not clear is because people either make too many assumptions and are mostly unaware of the assumptions they are making. Here is my favorite example:

_____

Boss to employee: "Call Jim this week, ok?
Employee to Boss: "Sure"

2 days later.

Boss to employee: "Did you call Jim?"
Employee: "Yes"
Boss: "And..?"
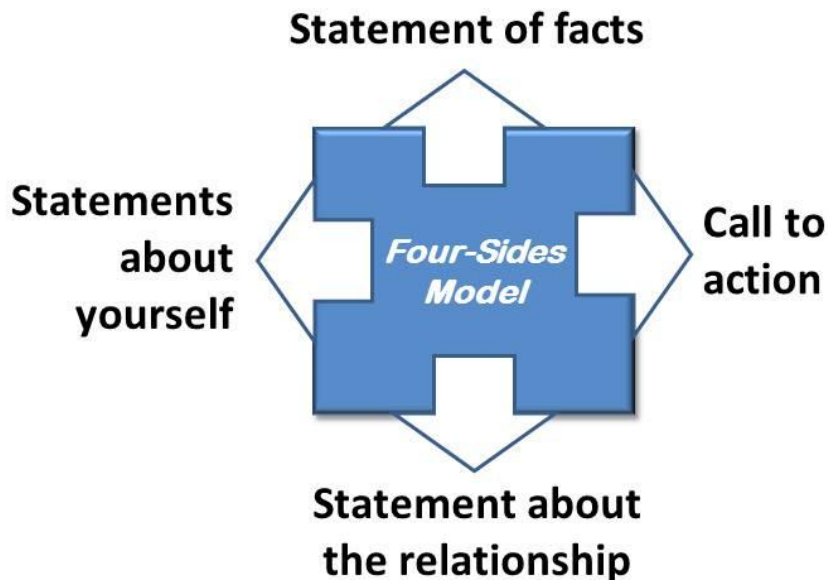Employee: "He was not there."

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What happened here? The instruction "Call Jim" is crystal clear, isn't it? Well obviously the boss made that assumption that the instruction would be interpreted as "Please ensure you get to speak with Jim this week". That phrase would have been more clear. However, the instruction also did not include the topic of the intended call, or the reason for the call as in: "call Jim about what?" And so on and so forth. A lot of conversations are conducted this way because we simply do not take the time to stop and think through what we are trying to accomplish. There is a reason why in the military an instruction is often repeated by the person that is being instructed. In stress situations it's is even more important to be crystal clear in your communication.

Another example we have probably all experienced in daily life:

Spouse 1: "The trash bin is full"
Spouse 2: "Ok"

This discourse usually leads to conflict, since the Spouse 1 communications should have read "Please take out the trash". But since Spouse 1 expected Spouse 2 to automatically make that inference, no communication happened. The result is a miffed Spouse 1, and a trash bin that is still full.

The four-sides model (Schulz vonThun)

Statement of facts

Statements about yourself

Four-Sides Model

Call to action

Statement about the relationship

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four-sides_model

The above illustration points to one great model for understanding this kind of communication challenge. The German psychologist Schulz von Thun developed a brilliant model to describe the dynamics of interpersonal communications, basically postulating that each communication should be looked at from four different angles.

For example, the sentence, "the trash bin is full" when said by one spouse to another, has these four dimensions.
Statement of fact ... the factual content is that the trash bin cannot hold any more content. We all know from personal experience, however, that in intra-spousal communication, the response to this sentence is rarely based on the factual content.

Call to action ... The implied content of the factual statement about the capacity of the trash bin is the call to action: "please take out the trash bin, now". The usual response to the factual statement is based on an assumption about the implied call to action.

Statement about the relationship ... In addition to the factual content, as well as the implied call to action, the sentence "the trash bin is full" usually contains a lot of content that describes the state of the relationship. This information is usually carried in the tone of voice, the timing of the statement, the body language, etc. and usually

implies a statement about who is giving instructions and commands about what aspects of the daily life.

Statement about the self ... Similar to the statement about the relationship, the sentence "the trash bin is full" usually carries implied information about the self, such as "I am busy" or "I am tired of the fact that you never notice that the bin is full" or "I refuse to do the dirty work all the time" etc. As you can clearly see, a seemingly innocent factual statement about the trash bin carries a lot of explosive potential when lobbed into an already charged situation. The way to use this insight is to carefully watch your own emotional response to peoples' statements, and to carefully clarify on all four dimensions, where ever possible.

Another very common line of communication you might hear in everyday life goes like this

A:" Where is the TV remote control?"
B: "Probably exactly where you put it last evening when you watched the late-night movie!"

The communication breakdown occurs along the lack of clarity in the first line. Instead of saying "Where is the TV remote control" - which carries the assumption that B knows where it is, or even misplaced it - one could have said:

A: "I can't find the remote anywhere, have you seen it by any chance?" .. which might have led to a different outcome and response because it provides context and a clear opportunity for a yes or no answer.

Entire books have been written on the concept of clarity, and I don't intend to rewrite them, but here are some tips of how you can structure a communication for clarity along three concepts:

1. Think about the outcome of the communication. What exactly do you want to accomplish? How do you know when the desired effect has happened? Be sure to include that in planning your communication! Most communications are very fuzzy in terms the desired outcome, hence the lack of clarity.
2. Check your message for assumptions, jargon, abbreviations, clutter and, above all, check for emotional baggage. Does your audience need or prefer the jargon? Can you say the same thing with simple words? What implications are you making when you are starting the dialog? And what are you REALLY trying to say?
3. How will you ask for feedback? (More about feedback in the next chapter) Feedback is the ONLY way you can know if your communication was understood.

You can do a mental check on the above points with the three words "Result, Simplicity, Feedback". Next time you write a message or try to engage in a dialogue, apply this clarity check and observe what happens.

Chapter 8: Feedback

Feedback is the 5th key to the 7 gates of understanding and agreement. Remember that all gates have to be "open" for an optimal communication flow to be achieved. As a reminder, the first 4 gates are (Community, Intent, Coherence and Clarity). With the Feedback gate, we unlock the true meaning of any communication, because only in the feedback we receive can we truly measure how our communication was received by the audience.

A classical situation for the feedback gate to show up is any time you hear the phrase:
 ...
"But I said ... "

We generally make the assumption that what we say/send is what is being heard or perceived. This is simply not the case. Everything we communicate is based on our world model (assumptions, experience, knowledge, etc.) as well as our emotional state, culture, intent etc. Everything we say is "loaded" with implicit context. If for example you go into a meeting and simply say "42 is the answer" ... you will achieve very mixed results. Some people will immediately grasp the hint towards Douglas Adam's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy book series. Other people will simply ignore the statement as completely meaningless. Other people in turn will try to think about what the possible meaning of the statement could be and will be frustrated by their inability to do so.

The inverse is true for everything we hear or perceive. Any message has to pass through dozens of "filters" before it even reaches our conscious attention. Filters like our own world model, our own emotional state, our own expectations on what should happen next etc. In addition to that, what we consciously perceive is a tunnel vision snapshot of the world constructed by our brain which freely fills in certain bits of information to achieve a consistent experience. (If you don't believe this, read any of the 100's of books on how the brain makes up the mind .. I don't intend to rewrite these books here).

The key point is. No matter how much you know about communication, no matter how good you THINK you are in terms of clarity of thought and message creation; ONLY feedback can tell you what really happened. And, as an emerging master communicator, you should not judge the feedback as either good or bad, but just take it for what it is. The proof that a communication flow was established, and the opportunity to fine tune the flow until the desired results is achieved.

Chapter 9: Flexibility

Flexibility is the 6th gate to understanding and agreement. In addition to Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity and Feedback, it is important to continuously improve our flexibility in how we both send and receive information.

A typical example for flexibility is the use of examples, quotes and analogies to make a point. Another example of flexibility is the constant willingness to accept communication feedback for what it is and keep trying to find different ways to get a message across. But the most important aspect of flexibility is the simple awareness and acknowledgement, that there different modes or states of mind and different personalities that need different approaches for getting into a communications flow.

Regarding the different modes of thinking/acting, the 2 key dimensions along which you can develop flexibility in communications are.

A. Logic/Facts vs. Feelings/Intuition
B. Relationships vs. Actions/Results

If you develop this as a 2 by 2 matrix, that gives you 4 different base states and modalities of a communication. I have color coded these 4 states and therefore called the system the RGBY system.

The „Rugby" System (RGBY)
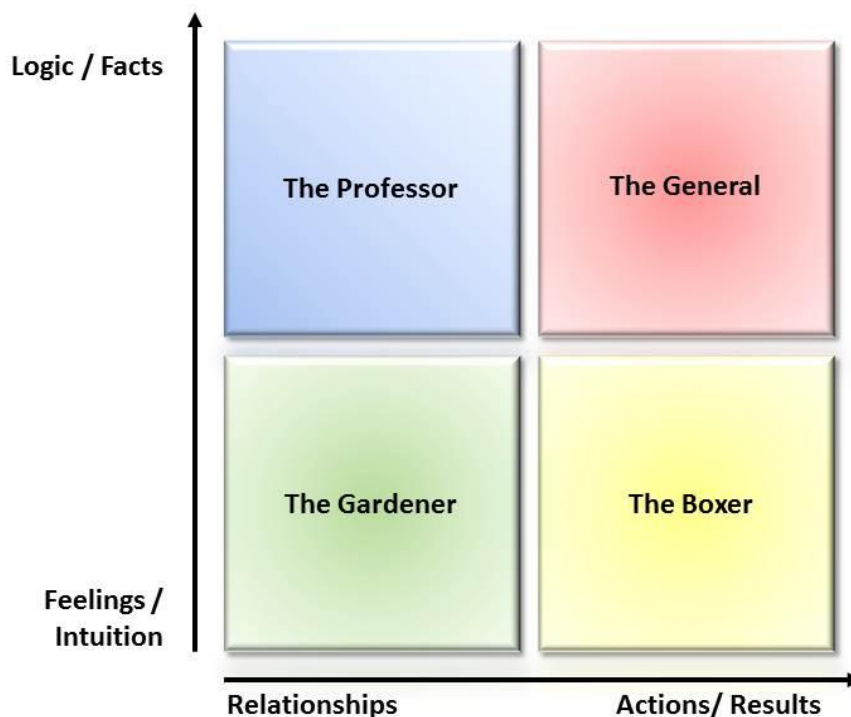
Often, when we are in a situation where communications are becoming difficult, it is because we have not matched up the modalities properly. While you are ready for "action based on the facts at hand", the other party is still busy "thinking about how they feel about that". At the end of the day, the purpose of any communication is to get to some form of result or action. The progress of thinking is always reflected in "doing" and you will never solve a problem by thinking or talking (unless the problem is purely created through thinking). But if people are still caught up in thinking about their feelings and you have not explored that, no amount of facts will get them to move.

So what are the action steps here?

1. Don't assume that everyone is in the same mode. Not everyone is ready to act on the spur of the moment.
2. Every decision is an emotional decision, it's just that people explain the decision differently. Some need the facts to get to the emotional state "Ready to decide". Other people need relationships in place to get to the emotional state "ready to decide". But at the end of the day, we are driven by emotions, and our brain's thoughts are able to change our emotional state just as facts are.
3. Find out where the hang up in the communication is. Is it about the facts at hand? Can you provide additional facts? Is it about the way things feel? What would have to happen to make the audience feel better?
4. Always seek the reason for the communication problem in yourself. Never blame the audience for not understanding. There is ALWAYS another way to get the point across.

Once you get to the point that you consider the simple 2 by 2 matrix in your communications, you will see a marked change in your flexibility, and thereby in your level of success in getting your point across and reaching a broader set of audiences with your message. Once you understand that emotions are the gateway to action, you will see your communication approach change.

Chapter 10: Influence

Influence is the key to the 7th gate to understanding and agreement. In addition to Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, and Flexibility, Influence is the master gate to communication flow.

Here is the basic rule you need to remember:

"Everybody is selling all the time"

What this means is that any communication, from the first cry of a newly born child to the advertisement billboards we pass on the highway is trying to influence you. The same is true for your own communication. Whenever you speak, write or even when you dress up for an evening out, you are trying to get a point across, you are trying to influence, get feedback, get praise or rewards. We are all trying to sell something, all the time; and the more we become aware of that, the more we will improve our ability to consciously communicate, to understand, and to come to agreement.

I understand that some of you will reject this notion at this point. "I am NOT selling all the time", you might think. I would ask for your patience. Give me a chance to explain how this insight can help you become a master communicator, and give yourself the chance to observe this effect the next time you are speaking with someone.

Here is the thing I would like for you to observe for the next few weeks. Proceed from the assumption, that, since **you** always have an implicit intention in any communication, **so does the other party** you are communicating with. Are you aware of that intent? Does it line up with your intention as well? What assumptions are you making about the intention of the other? Many times there is implicit agreement on the intent, but still, communication does not flow freely, and misunderstandings are almost the norm.

How come it is so hard to convince people to change their minds? How can you influence anyone to come over to your point, to agree with you, to take action with you? This loops us back to the introduction as well as chapter 1 and 2 of this blog/book where I talk about how our brain makes up our mind. The social brain automatically and constantly evaluates situations according to the fight/flight, good/bad, threat/benefit pattern. It specifically looks at situations using the following aspects, easily remembered by the SCARF acronym (a reference to this acronym is listed in chapter 2.)

SCARF stands for (1) Status, (2) Certainty, (3) Autonomy, (4) Relatedness, (5) Fairness

If you want to influence someone, for example to make them accept your price for the product you sell, you have to "put them at ease" at all of the 5 above levels. The objections they have against your value proposition, proposal or idea, could stem

from any ONE of the above or a combination of the five. So, as you prepare for your communication, speech, moderation, negotiation or whatever flow you are trying to prepare for, use the following 5 questions as a checklist:

1. How can the proposal positively influence the status (social standing, reputation) of the audience. How can you communicate that? How can you provide evidence that this positive effect has happened to others?
2. How does the proposal impact the certainty of the situation? Does it introduce risk or even danger? How can you address and acknowledge the uncertainties upfront and provide a meditation for the risk? Can you show that you have done this before?
3. How does the proposal limit the ability of the audience to choose their own path? Does it lock them in? Do they have the flexibility to choose options? How can you provide more options without confusing them? Can the audience even participate in creating more options? People will support what they help create.
4. How does your proposal affect the relationships of the audience? Can you point out how it relates to others that are like them, their peer group, to customer references etc.? Can you outline how it improves their relationships to others? What community are they joining when they follow your lead or proposal?
5. How will the proposal perceived in terms of fairness (give and take). What are you willing to give in order to get something? Is there a clear value statement (difference between cost and benefit perceived). How can you bring proof and testimonials that the decision to go with your proposal is well balanced and justified on their terms of evaluation?

We know that people will change their minds and accept your proposal or value proposition if it is "good for them at some level". The above set of questions gives you some simple "mental guiderails" on what that means.

I have now discussed all 7 of the keys to the gates of understanding and agreement of the CommFlowSystem (Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, Flexibility and Influence)

I understand this might seem overly simplistic to you. Let me assure you, I have looked at 100's of books on communication, selling, negotiation, conflict resolution and coaching and have found no better simplified approach than the one outlined above in more than 25 years of being a professional communicator. Everything I know, everything I read can be mapped to the 7 gates of the CommFlowSystem. The System can be approached with a minimum of investment (read this book several times) and deliver instant value in your next interaction (if not, let me know on my facebook group). If it seems to you to be based on common sense, it seems so because **it is** based on common sense. It's just that we tend to forget that in our everyday stressed out lives.

Humans pride themselves as being rational beings with superior language and thinking abilities. But at the end of the day, we are still ruled by the laws of survival laid down in millions of years of evolution. Our brain makes up our mind, but our attention, where we focus, and how we approach things, changes our brain. This is how we learn, grow and change, and communication should be an area of constant,

lifelong improvement. So, why not acknowledge that and use that insight to achieve a better communication flow?

Now that you have read chapter 10 (I hope you have read them 1 to 10, otherwise this might seem heavily out of context) I will go on with specific case examples in coming blogs that relate everyday examples to the 7 keys to the gates of understanding and agreement.

Chapter 11: How to get started

Let's get started with your personal journey towards becoming a "Flowmaster", or master communicator if you prefer that term.

Before we get going, though, I'd like to make sure you are ready to answer the following questions with a firm "YES". If you have a few "No's" or "Maybe's" in the checklist, you will probably not get enough benefits from the following chapters of tips, techniques and exercises.

(1) I have carefully read the first 10 chapters of the "CommFlow System".
(2) I am willing to look for a "mirror" (friend, partner, colleague, mentor, trainer) who can observe me "in action" and give me honest and judgment free feedback on my communication style, habits and patterns.
(3) I am ready to accept that the only valid way to evaluate the effectiveness of a communication is via the results that are obtained and the feedback that is received.

Three times Yes? Excellent! Here is why these questions are so essential.

Regarding the first question. The first 10 chapters of the CommFlow System lay down the fundamental "axioms" of the communication system and we will revisit theses axioms during every case example and exercise. As a reminder, here are the Seven Gates to understanding and agreement we need to learn to apply in each and every communication:

Community - Intent - Coherence - Clarity - Feedback - Flexibility and Influence.

As you will see, these gates are present in any communication, and most, if not all communication issues and exercises relate back to them. Don't worry if you have not memorized them, they will become second nature to you automatically as you complete the exercises of the following chapters.

Regarding the second question. It is essential to identify someone that can be your communication mirror, i.e. someone who just reflects - without judgment - your actions, words, habits, body language through observation. Without such a "mirror" it will be very hard to identify your deeply ingrained habits and your world models that guide your communication behavior and thereby your effectiveness. If you are giving a speech or a training class, recording yourself on video is certainly a good approach. Asking for feedback from the audience is another great way to evaluate your communication performance. But you can't have a camera with you all the time. So, thanks for saying "yes" to finding an honest communication "mirror", it will do miracles for your self-awareness and therefore your skills. Of course, you can get started without having this person identified, but try to make sure you begin the search right away.

Regarding the third question. To truly make progress, you must accept that the meaning of any communication only and exclusively embedded in the results achieved and the feedback received. If you hear the phrase "But I said ..." you can be sure you are in a communication that violates this principle. It is not relevant what is being said. It is only relevant what is being heard. It is not relevant what is being taught. It is only relevant what is being learned. It is not relevant how many mails you send, or how many PowerPoint slides you show. The only thing that matters is the feedback you receive. Thanks for buying into this principle, it is fundamental and also is embedded as the "Feedback" gate of the CommFlow System.

Exercise 1. The S.A.N.I. Technique

Here is an exercise you should repeat on a daily basis. The exercise takes only a minute or so. It will calm you down, ground your awareness in the "now", and will help you get rid of as much mental ballast as possible so you can focus on the communication tasks at hand. I am using the word SANI to remember the 4 steps you are going through:

S Silence. Try to find a place where there is NO sound, or at least a minimum of sound pollution. Sit, stand or lie down comfortably, and experience a minute or so of absolute silence and just observe what happens to your mind. You might be surprised about the level of "chatter" that is playing in your mind radio. There is no need to change that, just observe.

A Awareness. As you are comfortable in a place of silence, try to widen your field of awareness from what you hear and what is going in your mind to all your senses. What do feel & taste? What is your emotional state? Are you hungry, thirsty, nervous? Again, there is no need to go anything. Just try to cast the net of your awareness as far out into the "ocean" as you can without falling over board.

N Neutrality. As you are becoming more aware of your surroundings, the objects in your line of sight, or within reach of your body, try to observe how you "judge" them. You will see that "judging" something is an automatic process. Most things we observe are automatically categorized by our brain as good or bad, high or low quality, large or small, appropriate or out of place, pretty or ugly etc. The goal of this step is to observe the "judgment" as it happens and try to create a neutral stance to the situation to the extent that you can.

I Intention. When you feel that you have reached a state of Silent Neutral Awareness (this might only take a few seconds after a few weeks of practice), try to remember you intentions. These intentions could relate to the entire day, your week, your project, your presentation or to a problem to solve. Try to formulate your intention in terms of an outcome. Don't think about what you will "do" to get to the goal, but think instead about how you will know that the goal is achieved. What will you see, hear or feel when your intent has been realized? Try to "experience" the result to the extent you can. (Note: if you do this exercise in the evening, it might put you to sleep)

In the beginning the S.A.N.I. process might take a few minutes, and maybe you have to print a copy of these instructions to take with you. After a while this will become second nature and you will be able to achieve a state of focus very quickly. "Is this a mediation?" some of you will ask. If you so wish, it can be. I simply call it a technique for achieving focus. The goal is clear. Just imagine you walk into a communications situation (and most things we do in life and work do involve communications) with a distracted chatty mind, unaware of or closed to what's going on, biased to the things that are happening and unclear about your intentions. How well do you think you are going to do?

So much for chapter 11. With your three "Yes" answers, and maybe first S.A.N.I. exercise complete, you are well under way.

Chapter 12: The First Key: Community

Community is the first key to Understanding and Agreement. As explained in the introductory chapters, the term community in this context refers to the fact that no comm-u-nication can be achieved unless there is comm-u-nality of a substantial number of factors in place. Language is, of course the first common factor to be considered. And, when reading books or attending classes about communication, you will usually see a large emphasis on talking and the use of written language. I feel this view is much to narrow and will not be sufficient to achieve a substantial improvement in communication effectiveness.

Let's explore the term community in a bit more depth. Communities tend to form around similarities or affinities towards common attributes or characteristics. These factors can include location (villages, neighborhoods, ..), occupation (carpenters, lawyers, ..), interests (sports, reading ..), culture (ethnicity, traditions, ..) etc. As you have probably experienced in your day to day interactions, it is substantially easier to communicate if such commonalities are understood and established. To some extent one could say communication improves if you can "walk in the shoes" of the other person.

"Well", you might think, "this is all fine and good, but how does that help me in my day to day communications?"

There are 2 exercises I would like for you to use in the next several weeks to learn more about this aspect and to build out your skill level. If you have already picked your mentor or adviser (see chapter 11), make sure you discuss this with him or her. One of the exercises is active, the other one is passive. Let's start with the passive exercise.

Community exercise 1: Cultural Awareness

As often as you can, preferably once a day, pick a situation where you can observe a communication being established or in progress. Make some mental notes of some of the things you will observe:

- greeting and introduction rituals in different communities / cultures
- use of special jargon / keywords / hand signs within a specific community
- the matching body posture of people in a dialog that have already established rapport
- the opposing or diverging body language and posture of people who are not in "flow"
- "mind reading", i.e. the practice where one person finishes off the sentences of the other person
- group building when people of an established community react to a "newcomer"
...

The goal here is to build up your awareness of how much commonalities are actually implicitly assumed when starting a communication. The most common mistake many people make when establishing a communication is to assume the other person to be like themselves. The more you become aware of the actual differences of communication cultures in different communities, there more flexibility you will develop in your approach to establishing a communication flow. This "passive" exercise prepares you for exercise number 2, which is an active exercise.

Community Exercise 2: Cultural Flexibility

Once you have amplified your cultural awareness of the different commonalities that facilitate communication you can try the active exercise. The exercise consists in picking a communication that you can actively prepare for, such as meeting a new person, meeting an old friend, or a colleague. This can also include a feedback discussion with a team member or a performance review with your manager. As you prepare, go through the following checklist:

- What is the preferred communication model of the other person (formal, informal, 1:1 vs. group)
- What do you have in common with the person?
- What question can you ask about them that establishes that commonality?
- What are the differences you have observed or found about the other person?
- What do these differences mean in terms of the goal you have for the interaction?
- How can you adjust your communication style and tools to make it closer to the style of the interaction partner?

Note: Please don't overdo the preparation, unless you are a private detective or a CIA operative. This is just intended to mentally prepare for the communication and increase your awareness in the interaction.

As you complete the first rounds of exercise 1 and 2, you will probably observe that they are actually 2 sides of the same coin. You will probably also observe, that the more you pay attention to the cultural aspects of the communication, the more you respect the community of the other person, the more easily the communication will flow. A question I often get when talking about the community gate is:

Question: This is for one-on-one communication and personal interaction. How does this apply to giving a speech, writing a paper or sending an email?
Answer: Once you think about it you will see that this chapter and these 2 exercises can apply to individuals or entire groups. Granted, you cannot observe the cultural rituals of someone at the other end of an email chain, but you can increase your awareness of potential cultural bias in your communication, and increase the awareness of any community established traditions or rituals in the target group of your communication.

It is important to note that these exercises are not created to do once and then forget. As we walk through the 7 gates of Understanding and Agreement in this book, you will see how the individual gates and exercises are actually interacting and re-enforcing one another. And you will observe that these exercises will increase your ability to establish community and "flow" more easily.

The next gate we will address is the gate of "Intention"

Chapter 13: The Second Key: Intent

The seven keys to Understanding and Agreement are: Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, Flexibility and Influence. While acting as keys to 7 locks that should be open at the same time to establish flow, each key stands on its own as an enabler to achieve more effective communication.

When speaking about Intent, I would like to remind you of the 3 questions you answered with "Yes" in Chapter eleven. In the checklist you answered "Yes" to the assumption that feedback, in other words the result of your communication, is the only way to measure the effectiveness of a communication. While this seems to be "common sense" and "motherhood and apple pie", most people (when asked about their intent for the planned communication), have only a vague idea about the intended outcome or result. Even more vague is their approach to actually "knowing" or "measuring" the outcome of the planned communication. Here is an example of a typical dialog I might have in a coaching session:

Question: "What are you trying to accomplish with your presentation?"
Answer: "Ehmm, I guess I want to give everyone a status update."
Question: "How do you know what people want to know and how will you know you have accomplished that goal?"
Answer: "Ehmm ... I don"t know"

In the above example lies the root cause of a lot of communication breakdowns. Because the intent of the communication is not established (either upfront, or at the beginning of the communication) the audience is left to guess what the intent is and will try to interpret the "flow" to make sense relative to their expectations. The converse is true for the audience. If the audience does not set clear goals for their attending the presentation, chances are they won't even know if the liked the presentation or not. Overall, this presents a phenomenal opportunity to turn a colossal waste of "life" into a very productive use of time.

Here is the exercise I would like for you to go through the next time you prepare for a communication:

Exercise for Intent:

What is the main purpose of the communication: (check all that apply, or add)
- deliver information
- obtain information
- train / educate
- delegate
- entertain
- inspire
...

What can you do to measure if your intentions are achieved? (Use all that apply)
- State the goal of the communication ahead of time, or at the beginning of interaction
- Establish with the audience if your intentions are matching or conflicting with theirs
- Use the tripod method: Tell the audience what you will tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them
- Establish up front how you want to deal with questions (at the end, during the presentation)
- Give your contact information / availability for handling questions after the communication
- Establish a feedback channel (questionnaire, etc.) to actively ask for feedback
...

It is very important to respect community differences in this preparation. For example, an Asian audience will usually not interrupt your presentation with questions. They will hold until the end. If you don't allow for enough time at the end, you are basically short changing them. Western audiences can be quite brisk in their interaction style: sometimes they will expect to be able to jump in with questions at any time

As you prepare your tools (for example education is very different from inspiration), you must be careful not to pour too much of your own community and cultural bias into the preparation. Not everyone is like you, as a matter of fact, most everyone is UNLIKE you. Here is where Key 1 and Key 2 interact. The more you know about the community aspects of your audience and the more clear your intent for your communication is, the more chances you have to accomplish a good "flow".

Some of you might ask: "This seems appropriate for presentations, but what about one-on-one communications, especially when we know there will be a conflict of interest?" The answer is that the Key of Intent still applies. It often is a great ice-breaker for conflict situations by stating up front "I would like to give you enough information and enough opportunities to ask questions so you might change your mind on subject X or subject Y". If you are trying to hide the intention to change someone's mind about something, they might perceive you as not trustworthy which does not exactly help the "flow". Always be clear about your intent.

Use the next few weeks to apply the above exercise a few times before you initiate a communication.

The next key I would like to address is the Key of Coherence.

Chapter 14: The Third Key: Coherence

I hope you have had a chance to review the first 13 chapters of the CommFlow System. I am sure you have begun to see how the system works to improve your overall fitness, flexibility and resourcefulness when it comes to communication and establishing a communications flow. After reviewing and practicing around the first two keys "Community" and "Intent", I would like to drill down on the third key called "Coherence".

I have chosen the term coherence to encompass and group together a number of aspects that come into play when it comes to effectiveness of communication. Coherence relates to the assumption that when communication is delivered in a consistent, authentic, continuous, credible and structured way, it tends to be more efficient. And yet, while this seems like common sense, many people I speak to are not doing enough to ensure that they are "coherent" when they approach communication flows. Here are some tips and an exercise to follow. (Note: At this point in the course, it would be fantastic to have your mentor chosen. Don't worry if you have not signed anyone up just yet, but pick someone in your circle of friends whom you not only trust to give you judgment free feedback, but who also has a keen sense of observation.

Consistency. One of the main elements of coherence is consistency. As you begin to establish a flow, establish your assumptions, your intent, as well as a number of other things such as the time available for the communication and the mode of operations. Once you set down the rules, stick to them where you can. If you are changing an assumption, especially when you are changing your mind, state it clearly. Don't assume the other party can read your mind, even though they might constantly try to finish your sentences for you. The use and awareness of body language is another key aspect of consistency. I do not intend to rewrite the 1000's of books written on body language. My tip is to try to watch out for some key signals your body might be sending that contradict what you are intending to do.

Typical tell tale signals are: (1) Arms crossed in front of body, (2) Closed fist vs. open palms, (3) Looking down while answering a question, (4) Arms raised and crossed behind neck or back of head. Just observe when you are using these gestures, note down what they mean to you, and try to use them consciously to stay coherent with your communication.

Authenticity. Authentic communication works better to establish "flow". For example, if you are trying to be funny in order to "break the ice" but you are really in a rather lousy mood yourself, your joke will probably not "fly". If you are not a programmer, but you are speaking to a programmer audience, don't try to artificially "up your geek

factor". A techie audience will instantly call your bluff and lose interest. If you want to inspire someone, remember some things that inspired you and tell that story from your perspective. When it comes to clothing, dress for the occasion, but be yourself. After all, where ever you go, there you are. Your audience will appreciate a communication that flows from your core, and not from some "method acting shell" you have constructed for the communication. Remember a rule from the excellent communications discipline called Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) called: "We Cannot Not Communicate". This means, even when we are saying nothing, our entire state of being, clothing, posture, pheromones, even what we avoid to say, our tone of voice, etc. will carry a message to our audience. They will instantly and intuitively judge the authenticity of our message.

Continuity. Continuous communication is related to consistency but it introduces a time dimension. Most people do not "get it" in one go. They often need repetition, and sometimes a different medium to experience the message in their preferred model of understanding. Ensure that you can have continuity in your communication flow. This is where meeting protocols and summaries come in handy to repeat what was communicated. It also helps to set up a regular flow of information to cater to the fact that things might change over time. And while consistency might be broken for a good reason (new information has come in), continuity can still be established and will do a lot to establish the impression of coherence.

Credibility. Coherence and credibility are related. Among other things, the audience will evaluate your coherence based on how credible you are. That is how some world renowned experts can sometimes babble completely incoherent "gobbledegook" for minutes on end, and will still be rated as coherent. This is because the audience will blame their own "non-expertness" for not understanding the blabber, and will assume that the world renowned expert surely will know "what they are talking about". How can you establish your credibility? Quotes, references, examples and experts in the room can all help you establish your credibility.

Structure. Coherence and structure are related as well. If you want to prepare for a communication, remember a story you liked from your childhood. All good stories have a fairly simple structure in that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. They are also usually structured around chapters, and main events in the story line. Think about how you can bring a clear and simple structure into your next communication.

Exercise for Coherence
We are now already able to combine three keys to Understanding and Agreement into a single exercise.
As you prepare for a communication, not only check for the aspect of community (do

you know your audience) and Intent (do you know what result you are looking for), but also make a short check on how you will achieve coherence in your communication.

(1) What are the 3 to 5 things you must stay consistent about in your communication?
(2) What is the most authentic way to communicate in this context (what's your personal angle)?
(3) How can you establish continuity (what came before, what will come after)?
(4) what is the best way to establish credibility for the communication (examples, experts, facts, ..)
(5) how can you best structure your communication to be simple and clear?

While this seems a lot of things to remember, please rest assured that we do most of these things intuitively in most cases. It is just in our fast moving and stressful world, we tend to forget these basics. In addition, once we start using these techniques consciously, we can vastly improve our communication effectiveness.

Note: Please try to identify your communications mentor or coach before you move on to chapter 15 "Clarity"

Chapter 15: The Fourth Key: Clarity

Welcome to chapter 15 of the CommFlow System. Thank you for continuing to read. Note: At this point you should have identified your communication mentor or advisor. (If you don't know what I am speaking of, you have probably not read the introductory chapters and chapters 1 - 14. I recommend to read these first to obtain the context of chapter 15)

We have now laid a foundation for excellence in communication in that we are trying to observe the behavior and cultural aspects of our communication partners and target audience (Community). We are also trying to establish an intention for each communication flow based on the rule that the meaning of each communication is embedded in the result we achieve (Intent). In addition, we also are beginning to use the third key to Understanding and Agreement by observing the coherence of our communications by looking at consistency, authenticity, continuity, credibility and structure of our communications (Coherence). The next key we are going to explore is the key of Clarity.

"Let me be perfectly clear ... "

How often have we heard this sentence? It is usually the lead in to an implicit or explicit threat of a consequence of some action on non-action. The question is: What are we trying to do the other times, when we are not using the preamble of "let me be perfectly clear" Are we trying to be unclear? .. "Huh?", most will say, "what gives?"

If you ask people about how clear they are in their own communication, they would probably rate themselves very highly. If you ask them about how clear other people are in their communication, they probably will rate them rather poorly. If you reverse the experiment, you get opposite results. In other words, people overestimate their own clarity of communication and are somewhat upset if they are being misunderstood or if they cannot reach an agreement with the other person.

The concept of clarity is related to the (1) content and the (2) consequences of the communication. Most books on communication only address (1) and give you a million tips on how to de-clutter your communication. Great. This is good and necessary. But it is not sufficient to achieve clarity. In other words, clarity must also answer to the questions "what do you want? and "what"s in it for me?" Whenever we complain about a communication being unclear, fuzzy, ambiguous or confusing, it is usually related to the fact that someone is beating about the bush in so many words. In other cases we ourselves might actually not be quite so sure about what we actually want the other person to do, and how we would explain to them why they should actually do it.

Here is an example as a repeat from the introduction chapter, this time in the context of clarity:

Spouse 1: "The trash bin is full"
Spouse 2: "I know"

The content of the above communication is actually quite simple and unambiguous. There is no room for interpretation on the information content (bin = full). The same is true for the answer. It clearly acknowledges the receipt of the information (I know). What makes this conversation potentially explosive? The lack of consequences associated with the content. Spouse 2 does not know that spouse 1 might actually trying to communicate something like the following:

Spouse 1: Please take out the trash, I have done it the last 3 times. I expect you to do it this time or you can forget about me getting your groceries from the car.
Spouse 2: Sure, I will do it in one hour when I go out to the store to pick up some more fruit.

What I am trying to communicate in this chapter is: If we want our communications to be clear, of course we need to make sure that send a message that is simple and easy to understand, free of jargon and redundant complexities. There are 1000's of books written about clarity and simplicity and I do not intend to rewrite them. I think the key to the PERCEPTION of clarity is to accompany the messages and communications with context around the consequences of the communication. In other words, be crystal clear about the intended outcome of the communication. This is where clarity loops back to key number 2 of the CommFlow System (Intent).

Here are some examples for clarity in communications where the 2 key questions "what do you want", and "what's in it for me" are clearly addressed.

Instead of: "There is a funny smell in this room"
We could say: "Can someone open a window to let some fresh air in, and let the bad air out?"

Instead of: "We need to improve our communication skills"
We could say: "Let's decide which sales training class to attend so we can all get some feedback."

Instead of: "This software solution is easy to use and enhances collaboration"
We could say "Take the test drive of our software with your team. No training required."

I am sure you can come up with dozens of more examples, and that is actually the core of the exercise for the Clarity chapter of the CommFlow System. "Wait", you might say "This looks like there is only the kind of communication where one person wants another person to do something". As a matter of fact: Yes. I believe there is always an inherent or implicit intent in any communication. The only question is how obvious that intent is expressed. Even in socializing conversations, that are purely

"humming along" as "small talk" and "rapport" building, these conversations tend to be more rich and fulfilling when they are structured around asking for feedback and opinions (what do you want?), and involving the community of the audience (What's in it for me?)

Exercise: Clarity

For the next several weeks, watch out for communications situations where either your message is misunderstood, misconstrued, or not leading to the intended outcome. This could also be a situation where you are the one that is being confused or mislead by someone's communications. Analyze the communication based on the following parameters:

(1) **Community** .. how did the flow relate to the community aspects of the communication partners.
(2) **Intent** ... did the communication state a clear intent or planned outcome (what do you want?)
(3) **Coherence** .. was the communication consistent, authentic, credible, continuous and structured?
(4) **Clarity** ... did the communication establish an answer to "what is in it for me?"

If you are skeptical if this is the best way to establish clarity, I fully understand. But please have patience for a few weeks and put the theory to the test. Communications tend to be evaluated as clear if they leave no room for interpretation as to what is wanted, and what will happen if the result is achieved. Remember the introductory chapters of the CommFlow System where I introduced the SCARF acronym to establish how the brain constantly evaluates every situation according to the 5 attributes of Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. Clear communications help the brain make the decision if a situation is good (reward) or bad (fight/flight). The brain likes simplicity. Let's make our communications work that way too.

Chapter 16: The Fifth Key: Feedback

Hi. Welcome to Chapter 16 of the CommFlow System. How is it going with your communications mentor? Have you completed the exercises in chapters 11 to 15? What? You have no mentor yet? And you have not read the other chapters? Never mind, you can still get value out of this chapter, but I recommend you read the CommFlow system from the beginning, and I REALLY recommend at this time you find someone to give you honest and non-judging feedback on your communications skills. Which brings me to the core of this chapter: Feedback

In a very successful series of books around a communications methodology called Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), communications experts have laid down a number of really interesting and useful concepts that I do not intend to repeat or rephrase in the CommFlow System. However, one of the rules of NLP is so essential and fundamental that I felt I needed to dedicate one of the 7 keys to it: Feedback. The NLP rule states:

"The meaning of any communication is in the feedback you receive"

This is so earth shatteringly important that you should go back one line and read the sentence again. Wait, I'll help you. Here you go ...

"**The meaning of any communication is in the feedback you receive**"

What does this mean for excellence in communication? It means that we should strive to maximize the time we spend on asking questions and getting feedback. Instead of spending 80% of the time talking or showing stuff, we should be spending 80% of the time to obtain feedback about our communications. If you have ever been to a therapy session or in a coaching session with a good mentor (I have) you will acknowledge that you are doing most of the talking and they are mostly reflecting what you said in terms of a question.

The same is applied in management trainings when you are instructed in how to deal with conflicts through a technique called "active listening". Another example is the experiments that show that those people at a cocktail party that ask more questions are rated the best conversationalists. After all, the one subject people like to talk about most is the subject of their own life and times. And if you are the ones asking the questions (the best technique is to take the last sentence of theirs and repeat it as a question), you will be rated as a nice person to talk to.

However, communications is not just about one-on-one dialogs. If you are giving a speech, it's a bit harder to obtain direct feedback on your communication. But it is still important and necessary to build feedback into your plan for each communication. There is always a way: A form to hand out. A mail address to share. A time-out at the bar for an informal chat about questions etc.

Here are some ideas you can use in your day to day experiences. These ideas are also the core of the exercises for the feedback chapter. Read through the ideas, and try to find several dozen examples for each category in the next few weeks that you can then discuss with your coach/mentor/advisor.

Feedback by asking. Try to start any interaction with a question. In a one-on-one situation, ask about a common aspect of the relationship. In a one-on-many communication, ask for a "show of hands" about a specific question you have. In written communications, you can still start a chapter with a question, even though you might not get instant feedback, the audience will appreciate the fact that you are not just "sending". Each time you write, make sure there is a return address. A feedback mechanism must be a golden rule in each interaction. If you are in the business of communications: draft, test, draft, test, ..., etc.

Feedback by observing. When you are in an interaction, observe the reactions of the audience, one-on-one or not. The body language, where they stand or sit in relation to you, if they are focused on you or on their smart phone can tell you how you are responding. Even when you are recording a video, you can improve the effectiveness of your communication by asking questions of the audience. Keep this in mind. You can also observe your own body. Your body "knows" how things are going much better than your brain.

Feedback by sending. Make sure you are using "active listening". Focus on the communication situation at hand. Try to avoid being distracted by other things and get into the "flow" completely. If you cannot focus on the communication 100%, the other party will notice, and they might not listen to you either. Acknowledge the other messages with a nod, and by relating back to what was said. Watch out for your own body language, since you are also permanently sending feedback to your communication partner. The question is if you are aware of your own feedback messages or not.

With the 5th key, you are now ready to unlock most of the gates to understanding and agreement. I hope you can see at this point of the book that the 5 keys are interacting in terms of a system that helps you maximize the effectiveness of your communications. Key 1: Community, can be best improved by getting feedback from your audience. Key 2: Intent, can be best adjusted by finding out if there is a conflict of interest. Key 3: Coherence, can be best improved by asking the other party to give you feedback. And Key 4: Clarity, can be best achieved when you know about how to motivate the other person (what's in it for them?) Feedback is at the core of the CommFlowSystem, but there is one chapter that is even more important than feedback. The next key I am about to discuss is called Flexibility. Why is flexibility more important than feedback? Read on to find out.

Chapter 17: The Sixth Key: Flexibility

Welcome to Chapter 17 about Flexibility in Communications. In the previous chapter I was teasing you a bit by stating that feedback is the core of the CommFlowSystem, but that flexibility is even more important than feedback. The reason should be obvious. What good does all the feedback do if you don't have the flexibility to respond? So, flexibility is an important skill required to improve your ability to reach excellence in communications.

The reason we need flexibility related back to the arguments brought forth in the introduction of this book. Communication is like "keyhole surgery". We don't really see what's going on inside the mind of the person(s) we are communicating with, and the only thing we can really respond to is the feedback we receive. And what makes communication so interesting and challenging is that the very same message, the very same image, the very same conversation will be interpreted differently by each person. This turns communication into a constant dance where both parties have to be sensitive to the moves of the other person to stay in rhythm and flow. Let's drill down into the reasons why people are so different and what we can do to adjust our communications toolbox to address these differences.

There are dozens of systems that categorize people into different schemes or systems. I do not intend to repeat or rewrite these systems, and I recommend that you take any one of these classes, or read any one of these books. All these classification schemes go back to the same small set of fundamentals that I will lay out in this chapter in a strongly simplified format. Once you know the fundamentals of what makes people different, you can then begin your journey on increasing your flexibility in communications.

All classifications I have studied so far all relate back to the basic structure and chemistry of our brain. Think of the brain as having three major parts that have evolved at different stages of our specie's time on this planet (Note: I am not trying to be scientifically accurate here, just directionally accurate. If you are a scientist, just bear with me for a bit, I will come to the pragmatic tips and tricks in a second.)

The oldest brain part is dealing with the basic things needed for survival. Instincts "live here" that will be triggered by certain things you say or do, and safety and survival are paramount criteria for any conversation, since any conversation ultimately related back to real world concepts, actions and consequences. You will need flexibility in communications if you trigger one of these instincts by intention or by accident.

The second oldest part of the brain is dealing with the world of emotions and relationships. This is where we process a lot of the sensory input based on complex predefined neural pathways. A lot of the chemistry that makes us feel a certain way is generated by this part of the brain. "Intuition" lives here, and the way we experience and model the world in a more visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), or tactile

(touching), gustatory (smelling/tasting) way. We need flexibility in order to understand and adjust to the emotional world of our target audience.

The newest part of the brain is dealing with concepts, plans and explanations. "Rationality" lives here, and a lot of thinking is done in this part. We will need to have the flexibility to adjust to the level of detail, logic and proof our conversation partner needs to feel comfortable about a communication.

Here is the secret. All the books you will ever read about communication are based on this. No matter how complex the classification scheme of these books it all boils down to these fundamental 3 rules.

(1) The brain strives to minimize threat and to maximize pleasure and personal power at a minimum expense of energy.
(2) All decisions are emotional decisions. It's just different how we arrive at these decisions. And the way the body reacts to stimulus is vastly different per person based on the chemistry of these emotions.
(3) The thinking part of the brain is HIGHLY OVERRATED, it usually explains what happened and tries to predict the future based on these models. And these models are often very wrong.

"So", you might think. "None of this is new, and it's not even scientifically accurate. What's the point?"

The point is that you don't have to read dozens of books to learn more about these people classification schemes. You don't need to be a psychologist in order to communicate better and get to understanding and agreement. Just work on observing how people build their model of the world. Every time they communicate, every time they give you feedback, they are sending tons of data about their world model. Never assume that your world model is identical, or even similar to theirs.

You might be a highly-results oriented, pragmatic, visual thinker. They might be a relationship-oriented, intuitive person that likes to talk about things a lot. They might like to think things over for a week, while you like to jump in, do stuff and see what happens. The more you "open up" your acceptance that everyone acts within their model of their world, the more flexibility you will develop. It's an automatic thing. We do it when we speak to children. We do it when we speak to dogs. We do it when we speak to an old friend. We do it when we speak to our boss at work.

The key is to become "conscious" of that flexibility and to begin using it like a tool. We need to learn how to observe this flexibility in others, as well as to constantly look to observe and improve this in ourselves. When communication breaks down, don't blame it on the other person(s), seek the fault first in yourself. Ask if there is there another way to deliver this information, a way that maybe avoids the instinctive fight or flight reaction of the reptile brain, a way that addresses the emotional framework of the recipient, or a way that lets the audience experience the content through their favorite channel of processing (seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, relating, etc.)

Once you open up to flexibility, your flexibility will open up the gates of understanding and agreement.

Here is the exercise for the flexibility chapter (run this over the next 4 to 6 weeks)

(1) Identify at least 5 people in your community that you would rate as "very different" in terms of their communication style
(2) Write down exactly what makes them different (uses words, uses visuals, waves with hands, needs data)
(3) Pay close attention to the things that seem to work, and to the things that seem to fail
(4) Observe the SCARF pattern, as people evaluate the environment for threat or rewards in regards to Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness
(5) Watch out for the difference in their communication style when relaxed, or when under stress
(6) Write down at least 3 examples of how you changed your approach to communicating with that person based on your observations.
(7) Discuss with your coach / mentor (Rinse and Repeat, go back to 1)

We are now almost at the end of section 2 of this book, discussing the 7 gates to understanding and agreement in a bit more detail before we jump into case examples and practical tips and tricks. Before we can open up section 3, there is one more gate to discuss. The gate of "Influence".

Chapter 18: The Seventh Key: Influence

After throwing a bit of light onto the first 6 keys to the gates of understanding and agreement, it's now time to deal with my favorite key: The key of influence. I chose this key as the 7th key because I believe that any communication has an intent to influence the other party. The difference between each interaction, and between different people doing the communicating is if they are doing this in a conscious or in a subconscious way.

For example, as I am writing this book, I am trying to influence you to start using my CommFlowSystem. That much should be pretty obvious. But when we are doing small talk at a party, are we really trying to exert any influence? Whom are we trying to persuade, or sell to at that time? Is this chit-chat not just for pleasure and fun?

As I stated in the introductory chapters, I believe "everyone is selling all the time". Even at the party we are driving for attention, feedback and praise, status and acknowledgement, pleasure and power, and we use communication tools to accomplish this. And once we "buy into" this principle, it actually becomes quite a bit easier to understand people at that level. And it becomes vastly more easy to influence and persuade people.

There is no magic here. All the information you need to become a master influencer has already been given to you in the previous chapters. Surprised? Disappointed? You were looking for more beef here? Alright, I will drill down into this a bit more.

Let's use an example. Say Spouse 1 is trying to persuade Spouse 2 to change their mind about buying a new car. Spouse 2 is adamantly against buying a new car and would rather spend the money on a trip around the world. Spouse 1, on the other hand, hates travelling, more than anything and desperately "needs" the new car to impress their buddies at the fitness club who have bet against Spouse 1 being able to pull this off against the wishes of said Spouse 2. Dilemma? Deadlock? While a bit contrived, let's see how we would use the tools introduced in the previous chapters to influence the decision of the spouse in favor of buying the car.

The initial 6 gates of understanding and agreement are:
Community - Intent - Coherence - Clarity - Feedback - Flexibility

How would we use this in this context? Let's put the CommFlowSystem into action.

Community. Find out what the 2 spouses actually can agree on. For example, if there is to be a world trip, would it have to be now or could it be a year later? Would it be by plane or by boat? What is the list of countries one would go to? Would one go alone or try to join up with other people? Who would one visit on the way? How long would this take? What is the budget required? By initiating this discussion and by focusing on the things both spouses can agree on, resistance levels can be reduced and community can be established. Also, before deciding on the budget, the discussion if a car can be afforded is moot anyhow. This principle is also preparing to

a key prerequisite for influence and persuasion. The principle of mutual gain, in other words, you have to give something to get something. The other key here is it easier to influence people if they like you. And they will like you better, not only if you are nice to them, but if you are "like" them.

Intent. Find out what the real intent of the differing proposals is. The position of Spouse 2 is "world trip". The position of spouse 1 is "car". In reality, the real intent of spouse 2 might be "spend a large chunk of quality time together, far away from work, and village". The real intent of spouse 1 might be "prove to friends that I am in charge and can do whatever I please". By having an exploratory discussion about the motivation behind the position, one might come up with a number of options to resolve the conflict and influence the other to change their minds. Also, as in any negotiation, both parties are used to giving up a bit to get something, and as in any negotiation, the party with more options on the table has more flexibility to steer the discussion. In addition, while the brain is always looking to maximize pleasure and reward, it is also constantly looking to minimize pain, risk, and above all loss. If you are "taking away" something, you will inadvertently and immediately trigger a so called "loss aversion". This is a strong emotion and will not allow you to exert a lot of influence. One great way to avoid the loss aversion is to address it proactively. If someone is winning, someone has to lose. Factor that into your preparations.

Coherence. In this case it is important to be consistent in the line of reasoning, and not keep on changing the reasons why one has chosen the position. For example, spouse 2 could use the line of reasoning that buying the car would not jeopardize the ability to go on a long trip, and before the long trip a commitment to spending more quality time together would be "part of the deal". Credibility is also a key factor. If spouse 1 wants to influence or persuade spouse 2, it would be best to come clean about their "status" needs versus trying to sell the technical features of the desired car. The other element that plays into this is coherence with the community (Other people are doing the same thing). Or one can show consistency with previous decisions (We did the same thing last time when we bought the last car). Or one can refer to a previous commitment (But we said we were going to do this). The skinny of this is: Coherence helps build influence.

Clarity. As discussed in the previous chapter, clarity is not just about simplicity of words and concepts, but it's mostly about the uncluttered communication of the consequences of the actions, answering the questions about "what do you want?" and "what's in it for me?". In the case of the car purchase vs. the world trip, spouse 2 could use this technique to more clearly state that, once the trip is booked and committed to and budgeted for, there would be ample room to discuss the new car. On the other hand, spouse 1 could clearly state that the new car would mean at least one extended weekend per month together away from the kids, etc. Working on your value proposition is a good tool for influence, and clarity is the key to that.

Feedback. As should be clear from the context, this problem cannot be solved by taking fixed positions and then yelling the other party into compliance or submission. Stubborn refusal to listen would not solve the problem either, and both parties would be well advised to give each other feedback on the ideas generated. Feedback is a

key gate to understanding and agreement.

Flexibility. In this case, flexibility in communications might relate to the way where the conversations are held. By going to the travel agent to look through catalogs, or by inviting friends who may have been on a similar trip, spouse 2 can influence spouse 1. On the other hand, renting the car for a weekend and having spouse 2 taking a spin could influence the position quite a bit. Again, flexibility is all about acknowledging the different world model of the other party, and making sure the best tools and methods are used to get the point across. Especially in longer running relationships, the key questions of "what do I need?", "what do I observe?" and "How do I best communicate that?" are no longer asked by either partner which leads to a typical communications "rut" where no real "flow" is established and standard "catch phrases" lead to template-responses. The flexibility key can also be the key to a lot of the standard issues in relationship stress.

Of course there are several more principles around building influence that I have omitted for the sake of brevity. For example, we have not touched on the principle of authority. If you have authority, you have an easier time with influence. Authority is closely element of credibility in the chapter about coherence. Also, we have not touched about the principle of scarcity (We need to act quickly to get the special deal). Scarcity could be lumped in with the principle of clarity under the question "what's in it for me?".

Whatever you might find lacking in this short discourse, hopefully this example still illustrates that the CommFlowSystem can provide a structured approach to help influence people. Of course there are thousands of other books on how to sell, how to persuade, how to influence and even how to manipulate others. However, at the end of the day, they are all grounded in the same principles. They have to be. Because people share the a very similar evolutionary history, the structure of our brains are virtually identical and we are all trying to minimize threats, and maximize pleasure and power at a minimum expense of energy

While this might sound overly simplistic, remember that the CommFlowSystem does not try to be complete or scientifically accurate. The CommFlowSystem gives you a set of 7 building blocks (Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, Flexibility and Influence) from which you can construct tools to help you on your way to becoming a master communicator.

Here is the exercise I would like for you to complete over the next year or so, as you become more masterful in using the CommFlowSystem in your daily interactions.

Exercise for Influence (ongoing for each interaction or example). Run this checklist in every situation where you wish to influence a person.

(1) Community Check: Find out where the common interests and goals are.
(2) Intent Check: Outcome clearly articulated in terms of the planned result of the discussion.
(3) Coherence Check: Line of reasoning diagnosed for consistency, clarity, credibility,

continuity etc.

(4) Clarity Check: Have you clearly articulated "What do you/they want?" and "What's in it for you/them?"

(5) Feedback Check: Have you analyzed the feedback received from the interactions, do you know their world model?

(6) Flexibility Check: Have you built more options to reach them in their favorite model of communication?

(7) Influence Check: Moving in the right direction through "give and take", etc. (loop to 1, check with coach)

As you can see, the system starts looping and feeding on itself. I am extremely confident that by beginning to use a few, or even all of these keys in your communications, you will see a substantial difference even after a few weeks of practice.

Thanks for reading thus far.

This brings us to the end of section 2. I will now move on to the Appendices, where I will explore additional back ground information as well as situational tips and tricks for specific communication challenges. I welcome your feedback and input for these coming chapters. If you want to find out more about this, visit my facebook blog at

https://www.facebook.com/groups/Commsdojo/

Appendix A: Some key things to know about the science of communication & the brain

I do not intend to turn the CommFlowSystem into a scientifically robust methodology. Quite the contrary. The system should be firmly rooted in pragmatism and best practices. The system should work in real life, and it is not always required to know how something works, as long as it works. Interpersonal communication is not an exact science. Having said this, however, I still deemed it useful to dedicate a chapter to some interesting facts about communication that might come in handy in a conversation.

The following key aspects I found most fascinating in my research about communication. I am sure there are many more, and I look forward to your feedback.

The importance of non-verbal communication
Studies have shown that in personal, specifically in emotionally charged conversations, the impact of the words used are as low as 10% of the total "message". Body language (50%) and Tone of Voice (40%) make up the bulk of the message. This is compounded by cross-cultural effects when you are speaking in a foreign language. We do this intuitively when we speak to babies or pets, using mostly body language, facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice. This is also an interesting conversation when you "tune in" on some small talk. Even if you are not close enough to make out details, or if the small talk is in a language you don't understand, you can get the drift of the communication. Think about this the next time you are in a one-on-one situation, or when you chose a medium to transport your message. There are, of course messages that need no body language or tone of voice to be effective. This relates back to the "Clarity" gate of understanding and agreement. If you add the Consequences of an action or inaction to a message, the message gets understood quite easily.

The importance of communication preferences
People prefer a certain style of communication. Some people are very **visual**, and you can discover that preference by analyzing the language and media they typically use. They will prefer words that relate to the ability to see or visualize, and they will like to refer to the "big picture". Other folks are more **auditory**, and they will reveal their world model by referring to thinking, discussing, analyzing words, facts and knowledge. Other folks, however, are more **kinesthetic**, referring to a model where the prefer to "get in touch", experience something, especially when it's connected to their community. Like I said before, there is no magic here, but once you acknowledge the fact that people are different, and that they need different "portals" to their way of understanding, your flexibility will increase, as will your ability to communicate and reach understanding and agreement.

The importance of the brain as a "filter" and as a story teller
When we communicate, we mostly assume that the audience "receives" the information in the same way we would receive the information. This is a massive error. The brain filters out about 99% of all sensory information generated by the

body, be it visual, auditory or kinesthetic. In other words, only 1% of what is being received actually makes it into conscious awareness or memory for that matter. This is the reason why it is completely impossible to tickle yourself. The brain anticipates. In addition, the brain constantly fills in the missing gaps based on memory, plausibility and experience based predictions. While the conscious brain only actively deals with 1% of the information received from the "outside", it always strives to provide a full experience. It is pretty much constantly engaged in "story telling". That is the reason why even a small stimulus can trigger a complete memory episode, why a single word can lead to a strong aggressive or positive response and why we usually cannot completely agree on a lot of things. 99% of what's in our mind is GENERATED by our mind, and that process can create results that range from the somewhat fuzzy to the outrageously wrong. Keep this in mind as you progress on your journey towards communications excellence. This is the reason I chose "community" as the first key to understanding and agreement. Once we know the world model of our audience, we can fine tune our messages and our media to ensure our message can be part of the 1% received, and that the brain of the recipient tells the story in a way we intend the story to be told.

The importance of constant, automatic, instant evaluation, judgment and retrieval

The brain is a highly evolved system that helps us deliver responses that increase our chances of survival and that enhance individual and community progress. It does this partially by constantly, automatically and instinctively evaluating all situations as either positive (increasing status, certainty, autonomy, power, pleasure etc.) or as negative. But it is important to note, however, that these evaluations as either "positive" or "negative" are highly personal, and situational, and can change in an instant based on the individual's context. In other words, what is good in one situation or context, can be detrimental in the next, and the brain will decide in a near-instant, instinctive, non-thinking way. Often the decision for fight or flight is made by the older, deeper regions of our brain before we even consciously aware that a challenge or opportunity. Chemicals are released, resources and attention are shifted, and the body is geared up for a response at a subconscious level way ahead of our conscious awareness. We need to respect this in our communication. The rational part of the brain that we are so often appealing to is highly overrated, and can easily be overwhelmed by the instinctive and emotional parts of the brain. You can remember this by the sentence "Logic is King, but Emotions are King Kong". This is what we refer to as "gut feeling", i.e. our whole body has already evaluated a situation and communicates an overall "gut reaction" while we are still pondering about the positives or negatives of the situation or the communication. This is where "positive thinking" as an approach is also somewhat overrated. The brain responds based on our "wired-in" experience, and every experience is reflected in the wiring of the brain. If we want to change this inherent wiring, thinking about something is often not enough. It is much better to "act" upon it, and then connect the action with a species or individual enhancing positive effect on either our status, power or pleasure. That's why a call to action is so important in any communication. It not only delivers you the feedback you need to know if your communication was effective, it also anchors thoughts, opinions and evaluations in the neural structures of the brain.

Here is another thing that is good to know. While the brain is very complex overall, most of its detailed inner workings and mechanisms are quite simplistic, and almost mechanical. The brain, for example, cannot process "negatives". If you say to someone, "Do **not** think about your car!" the brain cannot process the "**not**" and already instantly invokes a memory of your car. If you tell someone "Forget Paris", all you achieve is that they think about Paris. Any stimulus that is not filtered out (only 1%) will generate an instant response and will more or less fully invoke memories and emotions. It does not matter if the stimulus is actually an outside event, or a memory invoked by the brain itself. So, if someone is afraid of dogs, they will have an emotional response to a physical dogs that is identical to the response generated by looking at the image of a dog, or just thinking about a dog running towards you. (sorry about this example if you happen to be afraid of dogs).

We have to be careful here with our preconceived notions of "positive" or "negative" imagery, examples. Also, the approach of "thinking positively" can backfire or become a complete failure. Say you stubbed your toe against one of the legs of your kitchen table. It hurts. A lot. There is nothing positive about that. The more you think about it, the more angry you will get that you were not more careful. The same is true about some incident at work. For example you did not get that raise. Again. It hurts. There is NOTHING positive about that. You try to think positive about it, all you do is "rub in" the fact that you did not get the raise.

There is more. Take childhood traumas. Someone stole your bike. Bad. It hurts, etc. Why do you want to invoke it over and over again? All you do when you try to "think positive" is recall the bad experience again, and again, and again. And the way the brain works, the more you invoke a memory, there more strong the memory gets, and the more the memory gets distorted and overloaded with your current bias. In other words, while we cannot always avoid getting angry about something, we can avoid "staying angry". If something is in the past, leave it there, learn from it, move on. That's why I am also a firm believer one should not constantly bring up bad or negative examples in our communications. All we achieve is that we invoke the negative memory in the audience, and they might associate us with that bad emotion.

Now, having said all this, I do believe that the inventors of the positive thinking idea PROBABLY had a good intention. What they probably wanted to achieve is help people focus on the now, and on positive outcomes in the future. And there is nothing wrong in my opinion about focusing on the NOW and on DESIRED OUTCOMES of future actions and activities. Whatever happens to you, accept the fact that you cannot undo the past. Focus your brain, and that of the audience on what's possible based on facts and situation at hand.

Appendix B: The 20-minute body language survival guide

We have probably all heard or read about it. Body Language. Our bodies send out messages to our audience before we have even spoken a single word. In certain situations, body language along with tone of voice can convey more meaning than the words actually used. Substantially more. So, yes, we have heard about it, but, honestly, do we always respect this when we enter into a communication? I thought it would be a useful thing to summarize the top 10 situations where body language plays a key role.

By going back and relating to these 10 standard situations you can create your own personal "survival guide" that you can peruse ever to often to bring your knowledge back up to speed. Note that I will not use any pictures in this chapter. Instead I will rely on your own observations and individual awareness of body language. This is a much more powerful technique as body language is highly culture dependent, and unless you are a true expert, you can actually do more harm than good with generalizations. As a matter of fact a picture showing a "power" gesture in one language could mean the opposite in another culture. Another example is "eye contact". While in the western culture this can mean interest and attention, in some other cultures it can be considered disrespectful and in some cultures is to be avoided. So, please be careful in your interpretation of body language across cultures, you might be really, really wrong. In most situations though, the cues received are fairly consistent, especially when they denote agreement or disagreement. In general the approach I am using is not completely unrelated to a technique taught in theater and acting schools called "Method Acting". Essentially, in method acting the acting students are asked to actively recall the emotional context of a situation they experienced personally (something happy, something sad, an aggression, a shock ..). This active recollection then serves them to elicit the emotional state, facial expressions, gestures, body posture, tone of voice and actual language modifications they will use in a stage performance. We can use the same technique to both prepare and analyze communication situations.

The chapter is structured along the following 10 very typical communication situations both from an initiating and from a responding perspective: (1) entrance, (2) introduction, (3) informal conversation, (4) topic presentation, (5) discussion, (6) debate, (7) conflict, (8) de-escalation, (9) feedback (10) exit

1. Entrance
Imagine, or better, remember, a situation where you are sitting at a conference table in a large meeting room. The meeting is in progress and a person enters the room. You actually have no context as to who the person is but are performing instant judgment on the person based on their timing and mode of entry. Now that you have this situation in active consciousness, what can you decide about your next entry into a situation? Think about the timing of your entry. Are you keeping your head up or down as you walk to the table? Do you walk quickly or are you hesitating at the door? Are you making eye contact with everyone in the room as you enter? There is no "right" or "wrong" here, as the situations can vary strongly based on the level of

community you have with the folks in the room. Just develop an awareness of your "stage entrance" and keep coming back to this survival guide.

2. Introduction

Similar to situation number 1, try to remember a situation about when someone introduced themselves to you. What did you like or dislike about the situation? Did they respect your status in the situation? Did they seem distracted or focus on you and the process of introduction? Was there a hand shake? What do you remember about it? Try to use this information you have now "front of mind" to plan for your next introduction to someone.

3. Informal Conversation

By now you should have "groked" the process I am using. As you recall a pleasant, informal conversation of the recent past, ask yourself the following questions. What made this conversation so pleasant? Where did the other person sit or stand relative to you? Did they respect your personal space? Did they show genuine interest in what you had to say by keeping an open posture relative to you or did their eyes and head "wander"? Did they turn their bodies at an angle to you? What were the signs that they actually where following what you were saying? Was there a nod? A smile at the right moment? A frown as you relate something that worried you? As you become aware of this, you might even notice the about 1 in 100 people that are actually "reading your lips" as you speak, sometimes even silently "re-speaking" what you are saying, a truly interesting effect to observe. As you plan for making a good impression the next time you have an informal conversation, remember these insights. This will also help you raise your awareness of your "gut feeling" relative to these kinds of situations.

4. Topic Presentation

"Rinse and repeat" the above process. In the case of topic presentations you will notice that attention is held and information is held more efficiently if the presenter makes eye contact with the audience. If you have the ability to move on a stage, restless pacing will convey insecurity, while a purposeful use of the space available will convey "mastery" of the situation. Always pick a person in the audience you are presenting to "personally" in that moment, for a moment. As they acknowledge that they are listening to you, make eye contact, and pick another person in the room. Pick, acknowledge, shift, move, pick, shift, move. It will do miracles to the perception of your prowess as a presenter.

5. Discussion

As you get better in this process, we can move through the topics more rapidly. In a discussion, ensure that you keep an open stance to the person presenting their point of view. Watch for arms crossed in front of the chest, or crossed behind the neck or head. These are not "open" gestures, neither is a fist. Leaning back in your seat signals reservation. To signal an open stance, focus on the person that is making a point and lean forward. If you are trying to form an alliance, focus on the reaction of the person that you are trying to form an alliance with. Everyone in the room will notice this subconsciously and realize there is an alliance between you and the person you are focusing on.

6. Debate

Sometimes discussions can evolve into debates when positions are presented and defended. Recall a recent debate. Did you watch out for the body language of the people that were in favor or against a certain position? What do you want to convey with your body language. How do you do that?

7. Conflict

Open conflict is easy to spot. Voices are raised. Skin tone is flushed, breathing is agitated, hand movements are faster. Fists are formed. Arms are crossed. Eyes are darting nervously or shooting "death rays". It is much more difficult to spot the hidden conflict. Once you become more attuned to your own body language in a conflict, you will have an easier time to spot the tell-tale signs such as avoidance of eye contact. Remember next time if you are in a conflict situation to make some notes about what you noted in the situation. Discuss with your coach/mentor/advisor.

8. De-Escalation

If you need to de-escalate a communication situation quickly, there is no better tool than to physically step back and to raise both hands with a show of open palms, and silence. Remember that our reptile brain takes over in conflicts and logic and rational thought is suspended for the time being. The reptile brain will, however, respond automatically and intuitively to respect of status (step back, silence, lower your head), increase of certainty (open palms, no aggression in sight) increase of autonomy (silence, no shouting match). Once these three factors are de-escalated from a threat status to "neutral", relationship and fairness factors can come into play again. Remember SCARF (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness). Note: this will probably not help in a situation where there is a threat of physical violence. The best advice here is to exit.

9. Feedback

Back to our technique. Remember a situation where someone has given you feedback in a way you were able to accept and appreciate. What was the setup? Did they leave you enough personal space? How did your SCARF evaluation go? Try to use this information as you plan your next situation where you are trying to give feedback to someone. Avoid aggressive or debate overtones and stance. Match their posture and stance of the other person to build rapport and ease tension. Deliver the feedback leaning forward (interest in the other person), and then go back to neutral to get feedback on your feedback. On the converse, when you are asking for feedback, be truly open to actually get feedback, not just praise. Watch for any of your tell-tale signs of disappointment if the feedback is not as expected. Obvious disappointment in your face and posture will subconsciously "shut down" the other person's flow of feedback. Now they will not give you honest feedback but a "sugar coated" message, which will not help you grow. So if you want feedback, prepare to "take it as it comes".

10. Exit

We all have heard the adage: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression". That might be true. But your exit from a situation is a perfect chance to

"destroy" a good impression, or to repair a bad initial impression. Your exit from a situation or meeting can be as important as your arrival. Take time for your exit, don't rush out. Be sure to thank the host, collect your belongings without hurry, make a commitment to follow up, bid farewell to the remaining attendees (a short nod can do) and exit with purpose.

I hope the above structure will help you raise your awareness of body language in your daily interactions. As an exercise, start with situation number 1 this week and make a conscious point of planning and observing the "entrance" situation and see what you can derive from it. If this subject has intrigued you, you can take any of the 100's of classes or trainings available on body language. At the end of the day, if your awareness is not "up" these trainings will do you no good. So, work on your "up time", and you will see results quickly.

Appendix C: Culture Basics

When doing research about communications, one cannot help but come across the concept of "culture" as a key factor in determining communication effectiveness. Everyone I speak to seems to agree that culture is important, but very few people I met can define "what culture is" in a few sentences. The explanations are either to complex, or the explanation is too simplistic. And usually the explanation does not offer any practical advice on how to use an understanding of culture to achieve excellence in communications. This chapter is an attempt to give you enough understanding about culture(s) so you can use it in your daily practice.

For purposes of this book, let's use the following simplified definition of "Culture".

A *Culture is the set of rules, values and guidelines that drives the behavior of a group*

While this might seem overly simplistic, I feel this definition is sufficiently rich to allow us to develop tips and guidelines for achieving communications excellence. If you want to understand culture, you need to understand groups. If you want to understand groups, you need to understand people. If you want to understand people, you need to understand the brain. If you want to understand the brain, you need to understand that the brain is a rule making engine that is looking to minimize pain and risk, and maximize pleasure and reward. Cultures store these rules at the level of a group, but are based on the same underlying principles driving the behavior of the individual.

When you are reading about culture, you will find all kinds of deep concepts to differentiate the various cultures. There is Western vs. Asian culture, there is Southern vs. Northern culture, there is high-context vs. low context culture, there are mono-chronic vs. poly-chronic cultures etc. I will not even try to begin to describe these as there is ample literature out there you can seek out and dig into this very interesting subject. Instead, I will offer a framework that lets you understand what makes these cultures fundamentally different and how you can prepare for the cultural differences in the preparation of your next communication.

All human behavior, as well as the behavior of groups, is based on the evolved structure of the brain. Therefore all culture can be basically related to the brain's drive to maximize security and certainty, status, pleasure and power. If we "buy into" this assumption, we can then differentiate 2 basic cultural strategies for achieving these objectives at the group level. These 2 cultural strategies determine the fundamental differences between the different cultures we encounter. Strategy 1 relies on explicit rules, we can refer to these cultures as A-Type cultures. Strategy 2 relies on relationships, we can refer to these cultures as B-Type cultures.

Let's explore this a bit further. In an A-type culture that relies on explicit rules, things are well documented, there are a lot of signs for everything, instructions how to do stuff, as well as openly available and well described processes. In addition, the culture generally heavily relies on the laws and regulations to govern the behavior of

the group. Authority is placed in the "system". Individuals are autonomous and self-determining. Relationships, while important, are not valued above the results achieved by adherence to the rules. While there are specific and deep variations, especially in the approach towards relationships, the western cultures including Germans, US-Americans, British, Swiss, etc. are A-Type cultures. You can clearly see if you are in a A-Type culture by observing how many signs you see on the street, how many regulations you are typically subjected to, and how detailed the contract requirements are for doing business. A-type cultures usually don't expect any rules to change based on who you are, or what your social status is. When there is a breach of conduct, the A-Type culture, true to its bias to rules, will expect the "system" to take care of the offense.

The B-Type culture is quite different. Of course, in a B-Type culture there are as many rules as in the A-type culture: These rules, however, are implicit or hidden. They are not posted on streets, or written down and handed out to foreigners. The rules and guidelines are carried by the social context, individual and group status, heritage, family association and by the depth of the relationships of the participants of the culture. Individuals are considered in the broader context of loyalty and adherence to the standards of the community: family first, then village, firm, region, leader, nation etc. Business is done based on trust in the relationship, rather than based on formal contracts. An informal handshake is enough to seal the deal. Consensus is important. The integrity of hierarchies, the implicit respect for superiors, elders, ancestors, or persons of authority is paramount. It is key to avoid "loss of face" of superiors and subordinates at all times. China, Japan and Korea come to mind, when thinking about B-Type cultures.

Like I said before, this is a gross simplification, but it can help you build out your sensitivity towards understanding why certain communication styles simply don't work in certain cultures. An A-type manager that is looking for eye contact and "direct feedback" from a B-Type culture audience will be disappointed. The B-type will avoid eye contact and direct feedback to not embarrass the other. Mass marketing will not work well in B-type cultures for certain products. Instead, one needs to market through referrals based on existing relationships, as well as family and group ties. While using a loud voice is considered a sign of strength and authority in the A-type cultures (the individual is autonomous), shouting is considered as loss of control in a B-type culture (the individual represents the community). The Japanese consensus building practice of "namawashi", (derived from "going around the roots" when preparing a tree for transport) is a typical example of B-Type culture group and relationship based process that can drive a western A-type to near desperation when trying to drive for fast results based on a contract.

So. How can we use this in our daily communication practice? Here is a few points to consider:

- Cultural divides do not just exist across geographies. Cultures can differ for each group, or company, or even at the individual level. My culture can be vastly different than yours, even in the same country, company and group.
- There is no good or bad. A-types are not better or worse than B-types, they are just

different. But just like blood types they don't mix very well, one has to decide which approach to use to achieve understanding and agreement.

- Try to use keen observation of a culture that you are dealing with, or you are part of. Is the culture more based on explicit rules and regulations, or more based on the depth of the relationships and the social context?

- Try to remember the definition of culture: Culture is the set of rules, values and guidelines that drive the behavior of the group. If you try to understand culture, try to gain access to these rules and values.

- Cultures are hard to change. The more implicit the rules and regulations are, the more embedded the culture is. In A-Type cultures, which are driven by explicit rules, this seems easier to achieve than in B-Type cultures, but it's still hard, especially when it comes to value systems.

Appendix D: Managing Self-Talk or "Dealing with the drama in your head"

Welcome to Appendix D. I hope you enjoyed the book so far and have started applying the 7 key concepts that are forming the basic principles of the CommFlowSystem. Now that we have covered the basics of what makes communication "flow", let's drill down into one last, very unique communication challenge. A challenge that occurs every single day: The challenge of managing our "self talk".

Self talk, in other words, is the constant, automatic inner dialog that is "playing out" like a "drama in your head". If you are similar to me and the many people I have spoken to about this, then some more or less random stream of thoughts are constantly "running" in your head.

It's like you have a number of radio stations that are constantly broadcasting messages, and some of these messages seem to "leak" into your conscious mind. And it is extremely hard, if not impossible to find the "mute button" on your inner "mind radio", even if you are trying to concentrate on something entirely different.

For most people I have spoken to, these messages are perceived in terms of a "voice" that is talking to you. Sometimes the voice is enabling and encouraging. "This is going to be great", "I am sure they're gonna love this." NO problem there. Actually this is a good and empowering voice, and athletes, actors and other performance artists often us the positive self-talk to actively change their state of mind and to prepare for a task at hand. But sometimes this inner voice is playing messaging that are distracting us, or even creating a "drama" of negative situations that can be distracting or downright debilitating.

Voices telling us things like "this is not going to work", "here we go again", "I am sure they will not like what I am going to present ..." etc. Since this is such a common communication challenge for all of us, I chose this as the last situation to tackle before I refer you to my online community.

Here is a couple of things I would like for you to note before we go into a technique to help you manage this inner dialogue by using the CommFlowSystem.

(1) The fact that the mind radio is constantly playing is completely normal, everybody I spoke to so far has confirmed this and was looking for a way to manage the self-talk situation.
(2) The brain has 2 basic "modes of operation". Let's call one "Focus on Now" mode, and lets call the other on "Story Telling" mode.
(3) Both modes are really important and the fact that there is a constant stream of thoughts in your mind is part of the "Story Telling" mode which is essential to the ability to analyze the past to predict future situations, to plan, to evaluate options, prepare for a situation etc.
(4) Our mind is constantly and automatically switching between the 2 modes,

depending on the situation. If you are solving an extremely difficult math problem in your head, the "focus on now" mode is fully engaged and the story telling mode is somewhat subdued. The same is true when you direct your attention to focus fully on your breathing. It puts your mind into "focus on now" mode, at least for a while, until the story telling starts again. When you try this, you will notice the "switch", and the better you become at noticing the switch between story-telling and focus on the now, the more you will gain control over your inner mind radio.

(5) The mind cannot deal with "negations". If you are trying to say to yourself "I must stop smoking, eating too much" for example, all you're doing is to conjure up the images connected to "smoking and eating". It is much more effective to avoid concepts that are directed "away from" and substitute them with concepts that related to "towards the goal of". If you use "towards" thinking, you conjure up the images of what you want to experience, as opposed of the images of what you want to avoid. If you try to think in terms of positive outcomes, if you are answering the question of "what do I want?", the mind radio will change "station".

(6) The mind-body system is a 2-way feedback system. Not only do you smile when you are happy and content, but "putting on a smile" will send messages of happiness and content back to your mind. In the same way, if you "act out" what you are trying to accomplish, for example by saying things out loud, as opposed to just thinking them, this will put you into "focus on now" mode, and calm the story telling mode. Standing up and walking around will tell your body an action-message. Sitting down will make it go into resting mode, etc. Pulling back your shoulders and straightening your back will relay a message of confidence, not only to the outside world, but you your own state of mind as well.

(7) Focus on activities and outcomes. Ask: "What can be done now?" Don't rely too much on the thinking machine to solve real world problems. Start doing, and observe how that feels. Remember that the mind can only solve problems that were created in the mind in the first place. All problems are really solved by actually doing something, and it often takes a number of steps to get something done. While decisions might be final, the results of the decision are often adjustable, especially if you start in small steps and build in feedback. The progress of thinking is in doing. The brain works best when it is fully engaged in all senses and can evaluate a situation holistically, across all senses. If you cannot do anything RIGHT NOW about whatever thing is going around in your head, try to focus on an aspect you can actually do something about RIGHT NOW. This will also put you in "focus on now" mode.

Let's get down to brass tacks and apply the CommFlowSystem to an example situation. In this example, you are preparing for an important presentation at a team meeting. You'd like collect your thoughts and prepare, but your mind radio is be stuck in a thinking loop, repeating self-talk like: "This is not going to work, ...here we go again, they are not going to get this, etc." And this is making you nervous, insecure and distracts you.

To get started with the example, remember the 7 keys of the CommFlowSystem are: Community, Intent, Coherence, Clarity, Feedback, Flexibility and Influence.

Key 1: Community

As your mind is going round and round, repeating thoughts like "here we go again, this won't work" etc..

- Accept this as a normal part of your thinking process. Don't fight it. Look at your mind radio as a skill. If you are fighting your inner mind radio, you are actually fighting yourself, which means, if you are winning, you are also losing at the same time. This is a dilemma without resolution. Don't fight with yourself .. team up!
- Give the "voice" a face or personality (who is talking? Is this your own voice, a friend's, a colleague's?)
- What would some other people in your community say about this situation? What would your mentor say? What would your best friend say? What would a person like Albert Einstein say?
- What does the situation look like from the "other side", in this case, from the vantage point of the audience?
- What do you have in common with other people's views? How do you feel when someone else is doing what you are just about to do?
- Can you manage to walk a bit in the shoes of the others, experience the world model of the audience? How do you commonly feel sitting in a team meeting listening to someone "throw a pitch" at you?
- What is your community's support for the presentation? Who can help, give you feedback? Have you checked informally with the members of the team what they've liked before?
- What does your self-talk voice say now? How does it sound now? Has anything changed by taking a community view of the situation?

Key 2: Intent

As you go through Step 1 and become more familiar with the face/personalities associated with your inner voice, can you think of the intention that your voice is trying to convey. How it is trying to help the situation? Your inner voice might really want to say "please remember this fact ..., can you watch out for that ..., why not listen again to the advice given to you by X or Y ...?" Try to accept that any behavior, even your inner drama, always has an intended positive outcome, i.e. the intention to achieve something. Treat it as such. This will also help you focus your mind on your task at hand. What is the intention that you have for the challenge at hand? What can be done about that RIGHT NOW, what needs to be done next? Once you shift your attention to the intended outcome, apply the following checklist:

- Imagine the positive outcome of what you are trying to accomplish.
- Can you hear it, visualize it, feel it, touch it? Spend some thoughts/mindshare on that.
- How would you know that the intended outcome has really been accomplished?
- What would be said, written, felt about that?

Key 3: Coherence

As you go through steps 1 and 2, begin looking at how you are communicating with yourself at this point in time. Are you sitting with your shoulders hanging down? Do

you have a frown on your brow? Are you smiling? Is your head up? Are your shoulders pulled back? As you speak some of the thoughts out aloud, does this sound confident? As you become aware of all aspects of your self-communication, try to act out (if you have the privacy, of course) what it would be like to achieve the positive outcome of the communication. How would you enter the situation, what would you wear, what would you actually do. The goal of this step is to move from the pure thinking side of the self-talk into a more "doing" mode and in so doing, shift from story-telling to "focus on now" mode.

Key 4 Clarity

As you might remember from previous chapters, the main secret behind the perception of clarity is the answer to the question "what's in it for me, what's in it for them?". Try to approach your self-talk from that perspective as well. Treat your thought pattern as if they were trying to add value to your task at hand. For example, any type of "pushing things to a later time" (procrastination) sends a message that you don't want to do the task / work. What are you really getting out of that? What's in it for you or others if you don't do something now? Can you allow yourself to do something else, something that rewards you, and then you do a bit of the task you want to do? What about the negative, self-deprecating thoughts that might be going around your head? Are these thoughts maybe helping you to prepare you for criticism from others? Can it be, that by playing out a potentially negative outcome in your mind is intended to "soften the blow" of harsh words that might be spoken? Preparatory thoughts of risk and failure can actually make you more prepared. Constant self-criticism can actually be "fishing for compliments", but it's also a key to learning and becoming better. Many experts have only become experts because they have made a lot of mistakes, have analyzed them, and have learned from them. If your negative self-talk is truly "fishing for compliments", try to become clear in your mind as to whose compliments are your looking for. Have you asked them recently about their opinion about you? Give it a try. Reality is a great cure against illusions. In short, think about how your "inner drama" is actually a positive thing that is trying to get you to a better place. Then keep amplifying your focus on the positive outcome of the communication you are planning for. Try to accept that fact that any communication will have some result, no matter what. We cannot NOT communicate, and that, no matter the outcome, you will get some feedback. And feedback is a good thing. So, in the case, you get feedback. In the worst case, you get feedback. Which brings me to the next point.

Key 5: Feedback

As you go through keys 1 to 4 (remember these are not necessarily sequential but can happen at the same time, or out of sequence), try to focus on the question "how many different kinds of feedback can I obtain?". Whatever it is you are trying to achieve that your mind is establishing an "inner drama" about, remember that the "map is not the territory". There is no substitute for the "real thing" of going out there, and trying it out. Keep an open mind on what you see, hear, feel. Ask for feedback, verbal or written. Prepare to take the feedback as is. Try to not take it personally (which I know is unbelievably hard). Try to see feedback as something purely related to the communication you have attempted. Try to write down how exactly you will obtain feedback on the communication. Remember that the meaning of any

communication is only and always in the feedback you receive.

Key 6: Flexibility
By now, in preparation of your communication task (going through keys 1 -5) you should be well under way to move from the "inner drama" and "self-talk" to a more goal-oriented "focus on now" mode, where you are actually thinking about what you want to accomplish, how you would know that you have accomplished it and what feedback you might obtain. The next aspect/key is to look into what flexibility you can bring into the communications situation. What if feedback A or B is received, how can you respond? Are there more options on how to communicate? What have you done in the past? What have others done in a similar situation?

Key 7: Influence
As you might remember from the previous chapters, "everybody is selling all the time". So, at this point, ask yourself if you are clear about what you are "selling". What is the influence you trying to exert on the other party? And, of course, how are they most likely trying to influence you? Will they be friendly, neutral or aggressive? How might you respond in either case? Do you have a good value proposition prepared for what you are about to present? Is it a value proposition that relates to the world model and objectives of the other person? Do you have any proof points on why your proposal, idea or approach is worth considering? Can you bring in examples on why something like this has happened before, or how other people are actually doing the same thing? What would the audience say to that? Are the examples relevant to them? Are the people you are using as "references" people that are acknowledged as authorities on the subject matter? Have you thought about how you can respond to any objections? What questions can you ask to clarify about the intention of the objection? If the objections are strong and compelling, have you decided on what points you are you willing to yield? Where are you going to stake your claim and hold your ground? Are you actually prepared to stop the discussion and "walk out" if the pressure to yield becomes too strong. etc.

(Keep looping 1 -7 as needed)

Summary / Conclusion

Give this system a try, whenever your inner drama and self-talk take over. I know this is not easy and will take time to master. But I am convinced this technique has the potential to positively influence your self talk. It usually works like a charm for me, and I hope it does for you, too.

Of course I am aware that this is not a miracle cure for every situation. And there will be situations, especially when you are under stress, where the mind radio can be playing at an overwhelmingly loud level. But thank goodness, most of us are not under stress constantly 24 hours a day, 365 day. There are always moments, minutes, even hours, where things are actually quiet, where we can actually listen to the inner voice, the inner drama, and start going through a CommFlowSystem exercise to understand what it is trying to do and use that to our advantage. Remember this is not a "one off" method. It is something, like physical fitness that requires constant renewal. In contrast to physical fitness however, the fitness studio is in your head and you can go work out any time you want, and it is free!

This brings me to the end of the static portion of the CommFlowSystem documentation. I hope you will read this book many times, and I also hope you will contact me at my Facebook group with your feedback, good or bad is welcome

https://www.facebook.com/groups/Commsdojo/

Thanks for reading and all the best with making the CommFlowSystem your own!

CHHO, Vierkirchen, October, 2012

Summary

I hope that the above example has shown you a number of things about the communication challenge I called Managing Self Talk, or "Dealing the drama in your head"

(A)   It is a normal thing, it is a good thing to have self talk going on. Use it to your advantage

(B)   By accepting self talk as a normal part of a process, and by looking at the positive intention of the self talk or drama, it can actually add value to the preparation for the communication task at hand.

(C)   The 7 keys of the CommFlowSystem can be used as a process to move from a "thinking and story telling" mode, into a goal and outcome oriented mode. You will find this in any communications challenge you apply the 7 keys to.

Give it a try. I am looking forward to your feedback and questions