**Understanding the Communication Climate**

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A **communication climate** is the social tone of a relationship. It's how people interact with each other within their relationships. Every relationship has its own communication climate. Indeed, social tone defines and distinguishes romances, friendships, and families. Communication climates can be positive or negative, and they can be changed. That's why it's important to understand them.

In short, a positive communication climate is one in which the participants feel *valued*. Researchers say that positive communication messages construct a positive communication climate. In a positive communication climate, people perceive others as liking, appreciating, and respecting them – they feel valued. Messages say, "You matter," "You're important," "You exist." In contrast, negative messages construct a negative communication climate, and can often be found with people who feel unimportant or abused and therefore react negatively. The messages here are called disconfirming messages, and they signal a lack of regard. Disconfirming messages say, "I don't care about you," "I don't like you," "You're not important to me," "You don't matter." It is the messages we send in our daily communications that construct a relationship's communication climate. It is*how* we say what we say in the course of our daily interactions.

The importance of confirming messages, and the impact of disconfirming messages cannot be overstated. Children who lack an environment of confirming messages develop more intense anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness. They are also more likely to suffer from mental and physical illnesses and any of many behavioral problems, including criminality and suicide. Victims of hate speech suffer similar symptoms as victims of other traumas: feeling dazed, shocked, ill, and angry. Sometimes, the decision about whether the message is confirming or disconfirming lies in our perception at that moment. We might perceive a gentle insult as playfully affectionate within a certain relationship, while we might also perceive a well-intentioned message as an attack.

There is a spectrum of confirming-disconfirming messages. Some types of messages are clearly confirming, others clearly disconfirming, and others lie in more neutral territory.

**Confirming messages** begin the spectrum with endorsement, followed by acknowledgment, then recognition. **Endorsement** means all-out supporting someone, or communicating that you otherwise find him or her important. This is the highest form of valuing, and therefore the strongest type of confirming message. This doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with everything they say, but rather, that you can find something you can endorse. An example might be, "I can understand why you're so angry." The next area on the scale, and a slightly less strong confirming message, is**acknowledgment**. You can acknowledge someone by listening to them as an indication of your interest. In fact, recognizing the speaker's thoughts and feelings can be very powerful in offering support when they have a problem. **Recognition** is the most fundamental act of communication and means merely that you recognize the other person. This seems fairly common and obvious, but how many times have you failed to visit a friend when you are in town or return text message? Regardless of your intentions, if your failure to recognize another person is perceived as avoiding contact, this message has the effect of being disconfirming.

In the middle of the spectrum, between confirming and disconfirming messages, lies a type of message that isn't always easy to categorize. When we disagree, we fundamentally say, "You're wrong." Intrinsic to this interaction are both recognition and acknowledgment, two areas of confirming messages. Yet disagreeing can be devastating to the receiver. As with other communication messages, we have choices about how to disagree with someone. We can be **argumentative**, which is defined here as the ability to create and deliver a sound argument. This is presenting and defending your positions on issues while attacking positions taken by others, yet not attacking the other person in any way. Argumentativeness is associated with several positive attributes, such as enhanced self-concept, and positive workplace, family, and instructional climates. **Complaining** is the next type of disagreeing message, and can also aim at one of two areas: the behavior at issue, or the person engaging in the behavior. Saying, "You always do this," sends a very different message from saying, "What's wrong with you? Why can't you figure it out?" The most destructive way to disagree with someone is **aggressiveness**, which is an attack on the self-concept of another person with the aim to inflict psychological pain. It demeans another's worth, criticizes, and sends messages of contempt. Examples are name-calling, sarcasm, taunting, yelling, and badgering -- all of which "win" disagreements at the expense of the other. Not surprisingly, aggressiveness has been associated with a variety of serious consequences, especially when it comes from people who are close to us. Research suggests that it is associated with anxiety, physical violence in marriages, juvenile delinquency, depression, negative workplace, classroom, and home climates, and adult relational difficulties in children of aggressive mothers.

Continuing along the spectrum, **disconfirming messages** are a subtler, and potentially more damaging, form of disagreeing messages. These messages imply, "You don't exist. You are not valued." There are seven types of disconfirming messages. An **impervious response** fails to acknowledge another person's communication attempt through either verbal or nonverbal channels. Failure to return phone calls, emails, and letters are examples. In an **interrupting response**, one person starts to speak before the other person is finished. **Irrelevant responses** are comments completely unrelated to what the other person was just talking about. They indicate that the listener wasn't really listening at all, and therefore doesn't value with the speaker had to say. In each of these three types of responses, the speaker is not acknowledged. In a **tangential response**, the speaker is acknowledged, but with a comment that is used to steer the conversation in a different direction. In an **impersonal response**, the speaker offers a monologue of impersonal, intellectualized, and generalized statements. An **ambiguous response** carries a message with multiple meanings, and these meanings are highly abstract, or are a private joke to the speaker alone. An **incongruous response** carries two messages that seem to conflict along the verbal and nonverbal channels. The verbal channel demonstrates support, while the nonverbal channel is disconfirming. An example might be complimenting someone's cooking, while nonverbally indicating you are choking.

**Responses**

It's easy to respond to a confirming message with another confirming message. This is how a positive communication climates spirals up and becomes increasingly positive. Responding to disconfirming and disagreeing messages is another matter, however. These types of messages can easily pollute communication climates and create a tit-for-tat battle that spirals a communication climate into negativity -- fast. One common response to disconfirming and disagreeing messages is **defensiveness**, which is protecting yourself from attack. Here, the communication climate is inflamed as emotions and face-threatening acts both escalate.

**Assertiveness** is communicating in ways that present your position firmly, clearly, and without involving the self-concept of the other person. Assertive communication involves verbal and nonverbal symbols to exert control, obtain justified rewards, and avoid violating others' rights. People who are assertive stand up for their own rights and express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs directly, honestly, and appropriately without violating another person's rights. Assertiveness also involves openness, refusal of unreasonable requests, absence of interpersonal anxiety, initiating requests, spontaneous expressions, refusals to be intimidated, outgoingness, willingness to take initiative, and active versus passive disagreement. Assertive messages tend to trigger defensive reactions less than hostile or aggressive messages, because you are explaining your concerns, rather than attacking the other person.

**Creating positive climates**

Researchers have identified six specific areas of communication that can lead to constructing either positive or negative communication climates. In each of these areas, a defense-arousing message is presented along with its opposite option.

**1. Evaluation vs. Description**

**Evaluative** messages judge the other person, usually in a negative way. They judge what the other person is feeling, rather than explaining their own thoughts, feelings, and wishes. Further, they are often *you* statements, which can trigger defensiveness. On the other hand, **descriptive**messages offer your thoughts, feelings, and wishes without judging the other person. They make specific, concrete observations, and focus on behavior that can be changed, rather than personal characteristics that cannot. They tend to be *I* statements, which may be less likely to provoke defensiveness than *you* language.

**2. Control vs. Problem Orientation**

**Control** communication occurs when someone seeks to control another. These might be as trivial as which television show to watch, or at which restaurant to eat -- but the sender seems to impose a decision with little consideration for the receiver's needs or interests. When people act in controlling ways, defensive communication climates tend to result. In **problem orientation**, the focus is to find a solution that satisfies both parties' needs. The goal here is to make everyone feel like a winner.

**3. Strategy vs. Spontaneity**

In **strategy** communication, speakers hide their ulterior motives. This is the home of dishonesty and manipulation. Example: *What are you doing Friday after work?***Spontaneity**, however, simply means being honest with other people rather than attempting to manipulate them. This doesn't mean blurting out whatever you're thinking soon as you think it, as there are appropriate times for self-disclosure and you threaten others with incessant spontaneity. Example: *I have a piano I need to move Friday after work. Can you give me a hand?*

**4. Neutrality vs. Empathy**

The essence of **neutrality** is indifference. It communicates a lack of concern for the well-being of another, and therein suggests the other person isn't very important to you. Its opposite, and confirming, behavior is**empathy**, which shows care and concern for the feelings of another. It is accepting another's feelings, and putting yourself in another's position.

**5. Superiority vs. Equality**

Messages of**superiority** are patronizing. They say, "I am better than you," or "I know more than you," and, as such, are very likely to engender defensive responses. Examples are, "You'll figure it out when you get to be my age," and "You don't know what you're talking about." On the other hand, messages of **equality** recognize that other people have just as much worth as themselves, regardless of their amount of knowledge or talent in a particular area. Examples to counter the above superiority comments are, "I'd like to hear what you think about this, so I can tell you how it seems to me," or "I'm not sure I agree."

**6. Certainty vs. Provisionalism**

In a **certainty** orientation, people are positive they are right; they know that their way is the only proper way of doing something, and they insist they have all the facts and need no additional information. This way of communicating disregards the ideas of others and demonstrates a general lack of regard for other people. In contrast, provisionalism permits people to have strong opinions, while they acknowledge they don't know everything and are willing to change their position, if another seems more reasonable. This orientation often surfaces in word choices. Certainty manifests *with can't, never, always, must*, and *have to*, while provisional is indicated with *perhaps, maybe, possibly, might*, and *may.*

In the face of criticism by others, we essentially have two choices other than responding defensively: We can seek additional information, and we can agree with some aspect of the criticism. Seeking additional information can mean asking for, or guessing about, specifics, paraphrasing the speaker's ideas, asking about the consequences of your behavior, and asking what else is wrong. In agreeing with the critic, we can agree with several components. We can agree with the truth, such as, "You're right, I'm angry," agree with the odds, such as, "If you don't talk to more people, don't think you're a snob," agree in principle (without necessarily changing your behavior), such as, "You're right. I'm working hard now. It's probably unhealthy, but finishing the job is worth it to me." Or, you might agree with the critic's perception, which you might use when you find no truth to the criticisms and can't agree with the odds or principles the critic is putting forth. In these ways, you can move toward transforming a negative communication climate into a positive one, and practice diplomatic and tactful communication strategies at the same time.

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