

Great Conversations - text

Chapter 1

Communication styles

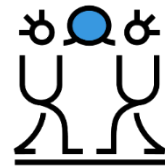
Communication styles

When you stop and think about it, you realise just how much of your time you spend communicating.

In the last 24 hours alone, it is likely that you have discussed something with a partner or friend, guided a mentee or a child and co-created with a peer. You may also have defended, empowered, supported, challenged, influenced, informed... the list goes on.

All of these situations are opportunities to have great conversations.

There are many ways to communicate and many purposes: we discuss, learn, educate, guide, inform and co-create. We relax and have fun. We create great relationships. We challenge or influence. Or we can develop, empower and support. These different purposes require different approaches, attitudes and adaptability; adjusting your style to meet the needs of the outcome you are after.



This module is a deep investigation into how we communicate, how the brain influences our ways of communicating - positively and negatively. You will learn about attitudes, styles and core skills that will help you lead and communicate effectively with all of your stakeholders.

Then, we bring learning from the whole programme together into a focus on meetings: how to have great ones and how they can be opportunities for great conversations.

In this chapter we focus on the styles of communication and attitudes essential for great conversations.

Not on the same page

Many conversations go to plan. You and the other party both know why you are communicating with each other, and you have a successful, two-way conversation.

But, other times, you might realise halfway through the conversation that you and the other party are not on the same page. Imagine this example:

After a couple of tricky projects with a client, you have come up with a new approach to managing their projects. You ask your colleague, Jakob, if you can run your idea past him.

You explain your idea and Jakob responds by telling you all about the course he did recently on agile project management. You try to bring the conversation back to your idea and Jakob seems a bit annoyed that you are not soaking up his wisdom on the agile methodology.

Jakob is a bit annoyed. How about you?

It is common to feel confused or frustrated when a conversation does not go to plan. You experience a threat to the expectation you had for the conversation, which can cause annoyance. You might be left thinking 'What is he getting annoyed for? All I wanted was a second opinion on my idea - what happened?'

So, what causes this mismatch of expectations? You are not connecting with each other because **you are each involved in a different style of communication**. This can lead to conversations spiralling and becoming unproductive, or even combative.

Understanding and clarifying communication styles can aid connection and productivity.

Communication styles

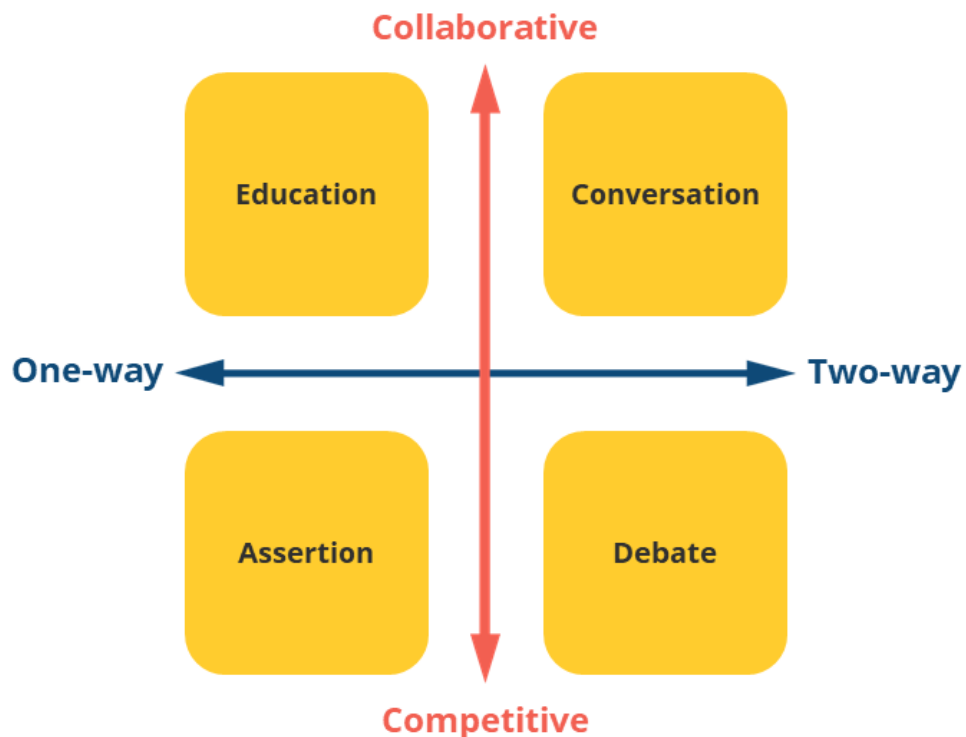
Let's start by looking at the different ways we can communicate, depending on the purpose of the interaction.

Take a look at this communication styles model, based on work by David W Angel.

The four styles

This model has two dimensions. One is the direction of flow: **one-way or two-way**. The other is about being **collaborative or competitive**. These two dimensions create the four communication styles shown on this diagram. Bear in mind that many conversations use a combination of these styles. None of them are right or wrong, but problems can arise when two people engage in conversation using different styles.

Styles of Communication





Education style

The Education style is collaborative and one-way.

It is an intention to share information for the sake of teaching or informing others. Normally, one person delivers information to one or more people.

This could happen in a meeting, a classroom setting, or it could be through a white paper, newsletter or some other form of single directional flow of information. It could also be a 1-1 conversation where one person is training another in a particular skill or technique.

In this 1-way conversation, there's still an intention to support and help - the people are on the same side

For example:

A mentor or subject matter expert shares information with colleagues who primarily listen.

Conversation style

The Conversation style is collaborative and two-way.

It is a dialogue. It happens when people are curious, listening, sharing ideas, building on others' ideas and generating something new with a spirit of collaboration.

There might be a feeling of debate at times, but it is in service of understanding differing viewpoints, perhaps even wrestling with ideas for the sake of common understanding and creating a robust common view or output together.

For example:

Multiple project team members actively exchange information back and forth with one another.

Debate style

The Debate style is competitive and two-way.

It is a win-lose situation. People share thoughts in order to win.

Multiple people may be involved in the conversation and there may be information shared from multiple perspectives, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it penetrates others' minds or changes opinions. If everyone is in a competitive mind-set then they all think they are right.

For example:

Adversaries express opinions; they listen only for the opportunity to rebut or challenge; points of view do not change.

Assertion style

The Assertion style is competitive and one-way.

It is when one person, or a representative of a group, expresses views that are often stated in opposition to the audience. This might be to propose a new way or convince others about a particular viewpoint.

There is no room for dialogue and the mindset is competitive.

For example:

One person firmly states an opinion and is not open to hearing others' views.



Your brain and communication styles

A **collaborative** style will generally be more productive in the workplace, particularly when you are working in a project team or having development conversations. As people collaborate well, they will likely experience dopamine and/or oxytocin.

However, the limbic system can lead to a **competitive** communication style, especially when it's in threat mode. This is because it has a tendency to be attached to ideas, it needs to be right and it doesn't want evidence to the contrary.

A **mismatch of styles** may create a threat to expectations, causing frustration or annoyance.

So to stay in a collaborative style, you need to proactively keep your PFC active and managing your limbic system.

Reflect on a recent conversation

Bring to mind a recent conversation that didn't go as well as you had hoped.

Take a moment to reflect on that conversation and write down what you think was at play.

- Which communication style were you each using?
- Did differences in style contribute to your disappointment with the interaction?
- Next time, how could you make sure you are both communicating in the same style?

What drives your communication?

Your brain drives all of your communication - even when you are communicating without really thinking about it. Whether you end up with productive or destructive outcomes is based on the **chemicals** triggered in your brain, your **mindset** going into the conversation and your **needs** in the moment.

Explore the three drivers of communication: chemicals, mindset, needs.

Chemicals

Dopamine



Dopamine is released when there are limbic rewards.

Perhaps someone feels a sense of belonging in a conversation, their status is raised by being respected, they are being trusted to make their own choices, the interaction feels fair, they are inspired by exciting expectations or they feel more certainty as a result.

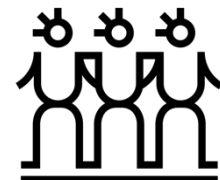
This increase in dopamine will increase motivation.

You and your communication partners are most likely to feel this way in collaborative, two way conversations.

Oxytocin

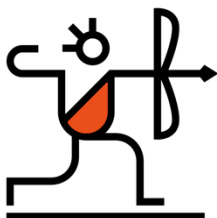
Oxytocin is the chemical of trust and connection.

Oxytocin is generated when there is connection, care, alignment and sharing with others. This happens when vulnerability is present, when people reveal something personal, they share their thoughts and feelings together or relive a shared experience - especially if people have been through a challenge together. Oxytocin may also show up when people laugh together.



Oxytocin is most likely to be released in collaborative conversations.

Adrenaline and cortisol



Cortisol and adrenaline are the result of a limbic threat response. It is normal and very human: threats happen and they are contagious.

Interactions that include limbic threats and toxic behaviours will often lead to win-lose types of communication.

These contagions cause minds to close, good will to disappear and possibilities of collaboration to dry up. It is important to manage limbic system threats as much as possible, have ways to get them out of our system so we can remain collaborative and productive in our interactions.

Mindset

Great conversations will happen more often when we have a mindset that invites collaboration, even if there are differing points of view. As we've addressed before, your mindset and attitude will highly influence your behaviour and the impact you have on others.



See this in practice in this conversation between Julia, an expert in her team, and Marilese, the new joiner that she is mentoring.

Julia is focusing on some data analysis for a meeting later in the day, when she's interrupted by Marilese. Marilese asks for clarification on the direction of a project.

Consider three different mindsets that Julia might adopt and consider how they impact her conversation with Marilese and the impact that leaves.

Mindset 1: "Not AGAIN. She doesn't deserve to work here"

With a mindset like this, Julia might make a sarcastic joke or speak in a way that conveys irritation and disregard. Marilese would then likely respond with a limbic reaction, even if it is subtle.

Disregard will not help you tap into a productive and collaborative style of communication.

Mindset 2: "Whatever she needs, I can solve it"

With a **problem-solving** mindset like this, Julia is likely to jump into telling Marilese what to do, most likely from a 1-directional style of communication rather than a 2-directional style. She might miss an opportunity to develop Marilese and encourage her to think for herself.

It's easy to believe that it's your responsibility to be the problem solver - especially if you have leadership, line management or mentoring duties - but this mindset does not help you to communicate collaboratively.

Mindset 3: "My role as mentor is to develop her"

With this mindset, Julia is more likely to invest time in a collaborative, 2-way conversation with Marilese. She's likely to provide **empathy and support** to guide Marilese to think for herself and figure out what needs to be done.

If you have a mindset of 'My role is to develop others', then you will see that almost any interaction is an opportunity for growth.



Needs

From the limbic system's point of view, interactions with others can be an opportunity to gain dopamine. Sometimes we try to get dopamine by playing a win-lose game and we try to get our needs met *at the expense of others*.

We are social beings, and we can help each other get our needs met. This is good for people, especially when it is done in a win-win way. But problems occur when people try to get their needs met *at the expense of others*; it creates a win-lose situation.

Meeting needs at the expense of others

Examples include: one-upping, talking over people, insulting others, micro-managing, needing to be right, bragging when others aren't really interested or driving a point when others have already gotten the message.

Here is one example of how "one-upping" works. Notice how a win-win situation becomes win-lose when someone's needs drive their behaviour.

Khalil shares a success...

Khalil shares with his colleagues about a project success that they all had contributed to. It's an opportunity for Khalil to create a sense of status - for himself and the team.

...and everyone wins

The others get a feeling of belonging as well as status as they hear Khalil share because he includes them. Everybody is getting some dopamine and everybody wins.

But then George arrives...

George was not part of the project, and he feels excluded by Khalil's story and the attention he gets; his limbic system issues a threat response.

...and tells his own story...

With a win-lose mindset, George feels the need for dopamine which he can get by one-upping Khalil's story. He interrupts and tells his own story of a bigger success that he had recently.

...creating a win-lose situation.

It feels competitive and now it feels as if there is a battle for who is the best. Khalil may end up losing dopamine as will the others who shared his success. While George may have gained some dopamine, others have lost.

Reflect on how you communicate within your team

- When might your limbic system manipulate your style of communication in order to get chemicals like dopamine?
- What kind of mindset do you have when you approach communication with others?
- What are your limbic needs, and how might they affect your communication?
- How might you go about conversations to create more win-win situations where everyone feels good?