# WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES, AND HOW DO WE USE THEM?

Before diving into a solution, it's important to have a foundational understanding of common communication styles and begin to identify where we each fit. I'll offer a frame- work I believe provides thorough and inclusive definitions of the styles, overlaid with another framework that sheds light on some of the issues we encounter when commu- nicating. It can be difficult to connect when we don't take each other's different styles into consideration.

There are four main types of communicators. It is helpful to understand each one and how they show up in our per- sonal and professional lives so we can adapt accordingly. Because we each process information differently, we can avoid many misunderstandings just by knowing the styles and using tailored strategies to engage with each type of communicator.

## ANALYTICAL COMMUNICATORS

Analytical communicators lead with data and are direct. They rely on solid facts for explanation. They avoid emotional validation when thinking. They take a linear approach when communicating with others and convey messages with very specific language. They have the ability to make rational decisions without letting emotions cloud their judgment.

### HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH ANALYTICAL COMMUNICATORS

- Make points using supportive data and facts.
- Be logical.
- Approach them when your ideas are completely formu- lated.
- Give them time to think it through and form conclu- sions without pressure.

- When making recommendations, show examples of outcomes for both sides of the argument.
- Answer questions with well-thought-out responses.

**INTUITIVE COMMUNICATORS**

Intuitive communicators lead with the big picture and are concise. They rely on visuals and like having options. They want to understand the high-level overview and avoid letting details hold them back. They rarely get overwhelmed and make decisions promptly, without overanalyzing specifics.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH INTUITIVE COMMUNICATORS

- Make points from a big-picture context.
- Show a variety of ideas.
- Use visuals to aid discussions.
- Discuss at a high level before going into details.
- Focus on end results rather than intricate processes.

**FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATORS**

Functional communicators lead with process and are systematic. They believe in structure and want to under- stand execution in a step-by-step format. Organization and

sequential outlines are essential to avoid mishaps. Details and established practices influence their decision-making.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATORS

- Address points in a methodical, orderly way.
- Establish a purpose before initiating conversation.
- Focus on processes from start to finish.
- Show project details with timelines and milestones.
- Ask specific questions to create detailed processes.

**PERSONAL COMMUNICATORS**

Personal communicators lead with emotion and are diplomatic. They value people's thoughts and feelings. They prioritize relationships and establishing rapport at a per- sonal level. They are approachable and are great listeners and advisors. They perceive shifts in people's moods and excel at mediating to resolve conflicts. They make decisions through consultation to consider different perspectives.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH PERSONAL COMMUNICATORS

- Use emotional triggers, such as feeling words, to address points.
- Be authentic and relatable.

- Be a good listener.
- Relate emotions to your thoughts on a topic.
- Show receptivity to different points of view.

## KNOW YOURSELF

I am definitely a personal communicator. It is all about the feelings for me first and foremost. I can navigate the other styles but when it comes down to it, I will always want to connect on a personal level whether in my personal life or in business. Moreover, if there is no connection for me, I am usually left wary about getting involved in any way. My way is not the only way, but understanding my style helps me be open to hearing other perspectives. I am also an intuitive communicator and love the "Big Picture," trying very hard *not* to get into the weeds of things. When you put these two together, you begin to get a very clear picture of the way I will typically engage with others. It's all good if we are speaking the same language…but what happens when we aren't?

When I want to shut down or disengage because a differ- ent communication style rubs me the wrong way, I have to remind myself to assume positive intentions and remember there *is* more than one way to engage so I can stay present in the conversation. I have also recognized the particular style that triggers me—analytical—and *how* those triggers manifest. This knowledge is invaluable and helps me ask for what I need while honoring the other person's needs, too.

# 4 Types of Communicators:

| Functional | Analytical |
| --- | --- |
| INTUITIVE | Personal |
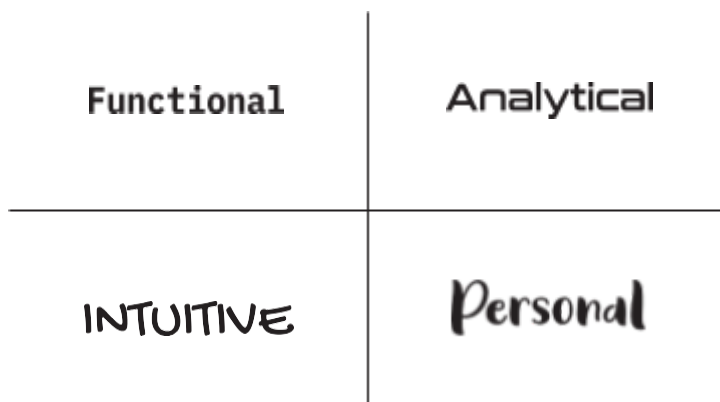
**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR AFFECTS[1]**

 I now want to overlay the communicator styles described above with another set of four types that relate to our "affect," or more specifically, *how* we express our emotions or feelings—through facial expressions, hand gestures, tone of voice, and other emotional signs, such as laughter or tears. These Four Affects combined with the four commu- nication styles listed above begin to create a fuller picture of who we are as communicators and offer some explanation to why we show up and interpret others the way we do.

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[1]    For more information on communication styles, refer to the Four Affects handout in the Appendix.

### 1. PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

A passive communication style is rooted in a pattern of avoidance—avoidance of expressing needs, opinions, emotions, and so forth. Those who communicate passively, then, often will not speak up when something feels hurtful or otherwise unacceptable, instead allowing those feelings to build up. That build up can lead to an outburst, about which the passive communicator might feel shame or guilt.

### 2. AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

Those who have an aggressive communication style will express their needs and opinions without regard for those of others, often advocating for themselves to a point that it violates others' rights. Aggressive communicators often interrupt frequently, are quick to criticize or place blame, and speak in a loud, dominating tone of voice.

### 3. PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

Passive-aggressive communicators seem passive outwardly but harbor or act on their anger in less obvious ways. This is true even though the object of/reason for that anger can be real or imagined. For example, a passive-aggressive communicator may appear cooperative while behaving destructively behind the scenes, use sarcasm to the max, or deny the existence of a problem when one is clearly

there. As a result, passive-aggressive communicators often become alienated from others and feel resentful.

4.  ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Those who are assertive communicators advocate for themselves without violating the needs of others, state their feelings and opinions firmly, and are respectful of those around them. Whereas aggressive communicators use "you" statements, assertive communicators use "I" statements. They tend to feel confident, connected, and in control of their own lives and happiness.

EPOCH

4 Types of Affects

Assertive

Passive

Aggressive

Passive-
Aggressive

Can you identify your typical affect?

**BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION**

These general introductions can get us thinking about the kind of communicator we are. However, before we can apply this information, we also have to identify the barri- ers that impede our ability to communicate effectively. All communication styles have strengths and challenges that impede connecting.

## WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF HONEST AND DIRECT COMMUNICATION?

I sent out a request to friends and colleagues to ponder the question "Why can't we just talk?" and asked them specifi- cally to address what gets in the way of their having honest and direct communication. Here are some of their responses.

> "It takes too much time. I don't want to disappoint anyone, or I just have different priorities and can't be bothered."
>
> —TAYLOR A., SALESPERSON, WHITE MALE

> "I often feel like my voice doesn't matter. I often have something unpopular to say and I get tired of being ignored. Also, the gender roles have become more evident recently to me as I work my way up in our organization. The jobs are going to the White males and that limits my ability to be honest because in addition to feeling ignored, I am worried about what I say and how it will be perceived."
>
> —MAITE I., PRINCIPAL, LATINA WOMAN

"When we discuss race as a staff it feels like it's a no-win situ- ation. If I'm silent, I'm not engaged. If I speak up and share my truth, I'm the entitled, privileged White man. Maybe the place to start is sharing that truth?"

—DAVID F., SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, WHITE MALE

"The main reason I would avoid a difficult conversation is that I didn't want to hurt someone's feelings or risk a relationship. But more than that, I would want to be certain that I am not overstepping my boundaries and ensuring I am making an impact in a positive direction as opposed to just sharing my opinion of a matter. Full disclosure: I have difficult conversa- tions often. I've gotten better at them for sure but still don't necessarily like them!"

—LEILAH K., PHD, DIRECTOR OF EQUITY, LCAP, MTSS, & CATEGORICAL FUNDS, BLACK WOMAN

"Fear of causing the situation to escalate to a place/space that no one is listening to each other. Worried that you could lose a friendship, wording your point of view in a smart enough way that the other person does not shut down and get defensive and dismissive—cause the situation [to] spiral out of control."

—JILL B., SALESPERSON, WHITE WOMAN

"It depends on the audience or parties involved in the con- versation. If I'm among friends and family whom I know I can express my true feelings with, it's much easier to have open dialogue. However, if I'm with strangers or acquaintances that I'm unsure of their political/moral/religious beliefs, I'm more

*hesitant to engage in tough conversations. However, if I find their beliefs are more in line with my own, I have no problem bringing up these discussions. Bottom line, for me it is fear of confrontation when I do not know or am unsure about the person I am talking to."*

—SANDRA H., PACIFIC ISLANDER/GUAMANIAN WOMAN

*"In this day and age, I feel that people are so tied to their own "right" opinion (and I can be as guilty of this as anyone), that we don't feel like it's even worth it to try to talk to someone. I had this experience when on Facebook someone said something erroneous and demeaning about my religion. I responded very nicely, saying that I would love to talk to this person more about what they had posted because it had not been my experience. I said I'd love to have a discussion about it. Of course, this person was not interested in discussing it, they only wanted to hear things that supported their already-formed opinion."*

—WENDY N., BUSINESS OWNER, WHITE WOMAN

*"The only thing that gets in the way of having an honest communication is the fear of how the other person will react."*

—CLAUDIA B., BLACK WOMAN

*"FEAR—of the other person's response—usually expecting them to yell or get crazy. I've found that if I approach people about an issue in a friendly manner, face to face (not by email, phone, text, etc.), it usually has a positive result."*

—SANDY P., GRAPHIC DESIGNER, WHITE WOMAN

## HOW DIFFERENT STYLES INFLUENCE THE RIR PROTOCOL

The interruption part of the RIR Protocol is easy for me. I'm a natural leader and have always been willing to be both assertive and vulnerable. The RIR Protocol can work for anyone, but some styles—like a more analytical, linear approach—can make the Protocol feel more challenging. First, with this style, feelings are not normally what they want to discuss, and it's harder to lean into the interrup- tion through inquiry when you want to put out data and facts. Understanding how you communicate will help you recognize what challenges you may face when using the RIR Protocol, as well as the strengths you bring to the conversation.

If I were a functional communicator rather than a personal one, my experience could be different. The way the process works depends on how you show up to the conversation. Knowing the four styles lays a foundation for understanding who we are as communicators and what some of the typical obstacles can be.

My approach is all about feelings, and I enter a conversation with how a behavior makes me feel before I get to what I think about it. If you start your statements with "I think," you're coming from a different place. My perspective makes it easier for me to recognize what others feel. People who think first tend to have a harder time recognizing because

they're thinking and judging. They'll tend to label a behavior as wrong before they tap into the emotional motivation.

It's tricky to have conversations about charged subjects, in part because these different communication styles come with their own sets of strengths and challenges. If you're the analytical communicator who leads with data and I'm the personal communicator who leads with feelings, we have to figure out how to meet in the middle. If you keep telling me about data and I'm telling you how I feel, we'll talk past each other.

In the school system, when a parent comes in to talk about their child, they are feeling emotional. The principal, on the other hand, will tend to lead with data: "Your child did this." The conversation starts with the behavior and the consequences, but the parent is feeling worried about and protective of their baby. The challenge for the leader is to lead with empathy. To be effective, the principal has to communicate care for the child before issuing a repri- mand, even if the child is wrong. Saying the kid is good but had a bad day will make the parent more likely to hear the message than leading with a negative judgment. That subtle shift can change the whole dynamic.

It's important to figure out both what your style is and how to show up for someone with a different style. If I'm ana- lytical but talking to someone who's personal, how can I

tap into my feelings more to move the conversation toward the center? We can meet somewhere in the center without sacrificing who we are and still communicate together. How many billions of people are there on this planet? If we can't connect and all coexist together, then we'll destroy each other. I can't even fathom not finding that middle ground.

## SUCCESS STORIES

The RIR Protocol might sound good and important in theory, but I guarantee it also works and yields tangible, positive results in practice. Here are just a few of the many success stories.

### WORKING THROUGH ISSUES WITH A COLLEAGUE

Many years ago, while working for another equity consultancy, I encountered a difficult colleague who felt I added little-to-no value to the organization. He was in a position of power over me and proceeded to try to make my life as difficult as possible. I initially was stumped by what to do; I hadn't done anything to him and could not figure out why he disliked me so much. In the beginning, I defaulted to some passive *and* aggressive behavior (I'm not perfect) when going to the boss for support, and my initial attempts to work with him failed. At the height of our dysfunction, another colleague and friend overheard him talking badly about me with another coworker. She immediately confronted them

both and then let me know what happened. The fact that she was direct reminded me that I had a tool to handle the situation. It was still early on in my personal use of the RIR Protocol, so it was not second nature to me like it is now.

One day, I asked him if I could buy him a coffee (he was addicted to Starbucks) and if we could talk. When he declined the offer on the grounds that a conversation wouldn't solve anything, I reminded him that—at the least—he'd be getting a free cup of coffee. Though the ice was not broken, it was at least cracked enough that he agreed, and we proceeded downstairs to Starbucks. In line, we chit- chatted about family—a natural conversation, especially because his wife had just had a baby.

After we got our coffees and sat down, our conversation turned back to work and the issues at hand. We spoke for several hours, and I was finally able to get to the bottom of his issue with me. Without disclosing too much, he had real and valid concerns. However, those concerns were misdirected at me because he had no outlet for them, and I was the easy target. Afterward, the air between us clearer, we realized we actually could learn to not only tolerate but maybe even *like* one another. That one conversation changed the way we worked together: the climate of hos- tility was gone in the physical space, and we developed a respectful and healthy way of engaging with one another. The RIR Protocol was truly our savior.

I had always recognized my feelings in this dynamic, but rather than ride my emotional wave, I had let them control me and acted out accordingly. Once I finally took control over them and was able to interrupt through inquiry, we were able to repair and ultimately heal together.

The impact of that moment was immeasurable, as I know it was that interaction that solidified the power and position of the RIR in my life.

## CREATING AN EQUITABLE SCHOOL CULTURE

Epoch has been working with one particular district for a couple of years, coaching its equity team. The RIR Protocol has been crucial in providing a foundation for communicating with the members on the team, as well as with the leadership, cabinet, and parents. It's given us a firm foundation that's helpful, as sometimes we have to deal with hostile folks in addition to talking to people who simply don't understand why the work of equity is so important.

When the COVID pandemic started, the school board wanted to be super responsive and immediately roll out computers to all kids within the first week. As they were talking about their plan, though, one of the teachers on the equity team had a visceral response. She said, "We can't do it because all of our kids don't have access. We can give them computers, but if they don't have internet, what good

is it?" She was highlighting how the plan would support the families with resources by giving them more, while allowing kids who don't have any to fall further behind.

She says the work around the RIR Protocol gave her the confidence to speak up, even though she was afraid. She felt compelled to point out the mistake she saw the board making and to explain why she couldn't support it. Because the superintendent had also been trained in the RIR Pro- tocol as a part of this equity team, the board members listened to her.

This teacher explained the need for a plan to ensure an equitable rollout of technology that wouldn't inadvertently harm some students. Because of her willingness to step into that difficult place and have that conversation, she single-handedly changed the district's trajectory. The team outlined a plan and the board decided to wait three weeks before sending computers to anyone. In the meantime, they found a partnership with Google to provide mobile hotspots and provide trainings for the rural, agricultural community.

When the computers finally went out, every family in the district had internet access. Some of the parents who already had internet connectivity complained their kids were being held back because of people who didn't have access. However, the district explained it was acting inten- tionally to take care of everyone rather than deepening the

divide, which meant taking three weeks to lay the ground-work for a more equitable plan.

That whole scenario illustrates why we do this work. The RIR Protocol provided a teacher with the skill to recognize what was wrong with the proposal and interrupt by shar- ing her personal narrative and asking questions. Then, the team repaired the problem by rolling out a solution that worked for everyone. Not only was the experience positive for the individual teacher who spoke up, her action had also a positive impact on all the students, teachers, and admin-istrators in the district. That progress, in turn, starts to build a new climate and culture of recognizing that we're all in this together and only as good as our neighbors.

TALKING WITH FAMILY

After all of our trainings, we do a call to action, inviting people to start small with practicing the RIR Protocol. We ask them to recognize one unresolved issue that's bother- ing them—one they know they should do something about, however small it might be. Then we ask them to think of one step they could take.

Hundreds of people go out and take the first small step in response. One client talked to me afterward and said she had a personal issue she was struggling with. Her mother is around ninety years old and grew up saying the N-word.

She felt like she wasn't going to change her mother's mind. I suggested instead of trying to change her mind, thinking of a way to interrupt. This client saw her mom as a good person overall, except for this behavior. What could she do to trigger her mother's empathy and bring out a different side of her?

She ended up sharing a story with her mother about one of her students of color. They had a different kind of conversation than usual. That one conversation didn't change her mom's mind, but it was a step toward getting her mom to engage with more positive, realistic, humanizing imagery. That approach exemplifies contact theory—that is, the social principle that states that the more exposure you have to different cultures, the higher your likelihood of engaging with and viewing that culture positively. Opening the door with a low degree of contact, even anecdotal—as we learned in our last example— allows people (like my client's mother) to reflect inward and internalize more positive examples over time.

A major turning point came when her mom said, "You know what, this is just the way I was raised, and maybe it wasn't right." That self-reflection was a huge win. The acknowledgment in itself marked a meaningful shift.

ACHIEVING PROFESSIONAL CLARITY

A friend of mine—we'll call her Sarah—first used the RIR Protocol in a professional capacity. She was tasked with writ-

ing a speech for an older man who'd raised two daughters on his own. He was talking about the importance of fathers, but the material he gave her didn't sit right with her. She felt it was very patriarchal and demeaning of women's capabilities.

In the past, before learning the RIR Protocol, Sarah would have ended the professional relationship immediately. Instead, she decided to have a difficult conversation with him, explaining that she'd also been raising two daughters on her own. Sarah explained that his emphasis on men "saving" women felt inaccurate and dismissive of her own experience.

They had a good, long exchange, in which he explained he didn't mean to be dismissive, nor did he believe men were superior or women were incapable on their own. The two were able to have a productive conversation about how to reframe his speech to capture what he actually believed, without alienating his intended audience. Because of the RIR Protocol, she was able to recognize, interrupt, and repair—ultimately having a productive conversation and continuing the work, rather than avoiding and ending the relationship. She showed up, and both sides benefitted.

**THE TIME IS NOW**

We are at a precipice where we have to decide who we're going to be. I believe we can be amazing, growing and changing with the energy of Aquarius. Or we can spiral

down until we no longer recognize ourselves. Part of me honestly feels pity for people who have so much hate in their hearts. What must it feel like to hate all the time? What must it do to a person to be constantly angry? That com- passion is my "why." Hatred manifests in our bodies and brings us all down, so the time to act is now.

The other day, a colleague sent me an upsetting text about our budget. I took a deep breath and asked him to call me when he had the time, because it was not a conversation for a text. We had a heated conversation. I was emotionally charged, and so was he. We talked about trust. What was great, though, was my confidence even in the moment that we would come through to the other side. We've been on this journey together, and a difficult conversation would not derail what we've built. In the end, he actually acknowl- edged to other members of the organization that he'd initially approached me poorly and that my reaction had stirred up fear in him. He also said he appreciated my will- ingness to speak on the phone with him instead of getting in a texting war. We could have a painful conversation but still communicate and get through it better. I can't imagine living any other way, especially with people I care about.

It's important not to mistake compassion for weakness. Having these conversations doesn't mean you're condon- ing or consenting to bad behavior. You're simply staying in the relationship and trying to repair a harm.

**PAUSE AND PRACTICE**

- Re-read the four communication styles. What type of com-municator are you?

- Which of the Four Affects do you typically default to?2

- How do the two combined impact the way you communi- cate?

- How do the two combined impact the way you hear others?

- What communication style triggers you the most? How does that show up in your life?

- What are some steps you can take to reduce those trig- gers and strengthen your communication with the particular style and/or affect?