

## **The Personal Communication Ability – Communication to Understand the Others (and Ourselves)**

Erika VÁRADI-CSEMA

### **ABSTRACT**

The success of human communication depends significantly on the communication skills of the individual. Just as a child develops from an instinctive being into a conscious being, learning countless things along the way, so we also can shape and develop our communication skills. This is important not only because it can contribute to a more successful personal and professional life, but also because it enables us to not only give and receive information, but also to share our feelings and needs more effectively. The aim of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of communication skills and then highlight the extent to which communication as a tool can help us to understand ourselves and the other party involved in the interaction, to articulate our own needs and interests more effectively.

### **KEYWORDS**

personal communication skills, self-awareness, problem processing, neutralization methods, alternative conflict-resolution techniques

### **1. The Human Communication as a Tool of Social Interaction**

Human communication skills can be approached from many different angles. Biological communication, for example, refers to the exchange of messages between individual cells or organs<sup>1</sup>. Cell communication itself involves the sharing of various types of information, such as genetic, metabolic, or neural information, between the cells involved. Therefore, all humans have biological communication skills, just as social and cultural communication can take countless forms.

The ability to communicate at a social level develops very quickly in newborns, as it enables them to acquire the skills necessary for survival. The first concrete form

| 1 Forgó, 2011, pp. 101–104. |

| Erika Váradi-Csema (2025) 'The Personal Communication Ability – Communication to Understand the Others (and Ourselves)' in Erika Váradi-Csema (ed.) *Interdisciplinary and Child-Friendly Communication*. Miskolc-Budapest: Central European Academic Publishing. pp. 59–66. [https://doi.org/10.71009/2025.evcs.iacfc\\_5](https://doi.org/10.71009/2025.evcs.iacfc_5) |

of this is the use of nonverbal signals. These include eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, spatial distance, and posture. The ability to speak, which develops alongside cognitive development, further expands the possible channels of interaction. Verbal communication can take place both orally and in writing, but in the latter case, the metacommunicative message package is more limited, as, for example, intonation, volume, and other speech-related message channels cannot be taken into account. However, in any interaction, the parties involved also perceive unconscious messages accompanying the conversation, which may be verbal or nonverbal. In the latter case, we refer to this as metacommunication.

*Personal communication competence* refers to the possession of skills that enable individuals to successfully share their feelings and needs, effectively formulate their messages, and receive the responses or reactions that were the original purpose of their communication. We all have strengths and weaknesses depending on the specific situation and purpose of our interpersonal communication.

Among communication skills, the ability to practice so-called key competencies, such as active listening, understanding body language or tone of voice, or showing empathy, is particularly important.

Thus, if an individual communicates verbally, it is important to be clear, unambiguous, and appropriately concise; practices nonverbal communication, it is important to correctly detect and interpret the given signals, as well as to use appropriate body language and eye contact; in the case of written communication, clear and concise wording is desirable.

Showing empathy and respect towards the other party is at least as important as sufficient determination and confidence, but it is also important to emphasize that, in addition to these, our ability to listen actively is a key competence within communication skills. The essence of this is to use eye contact, other gestures, and test speech to reassure the other party that we are interested in their opinions and thought. The effectiveness of communication increases if we ensure the correct interpretation of what is said by asking questions and by rephrasing and giving feedback on what we have heard.

Communication is an important tool for social interactions. However, in order for any alternative solution to be able to achieve real results, the process of understanding and – if the case needed – forgiveness cannot be ignored.

Behind human reactions, a decision made in a specific case, and the response to the other's action or phrase, there are many factors influencing the decision. However, how I feel in a given situation, how I experience the other party's reaction, how I am able to react consciously, depends significantly on self-awareness and my ability to evaluate the other party's messages.

When examining the effective operation of these techniques, we have to step out of the limits of the criminal justice system and now turn our attention to the two actors in the story, i.e. the parties involved in the conflict. The analysis of the conditions and processes necessary for the real resolution of an interpersonal conflict forces us to embark on a journey in which we must focus on the emotions too.

## 2. Understanding Others

In order for a conflict situation to be effectively resolved, the parties must acquire and bring forward a number of skills during the process. Thus, they must be able to participate in the process in a meaningful way, to listen to each other, to understand their motivations, to accept each other, to take responsibility, to apologise and accept the apology, and to learn lessons<sup>2</sup>. The emergence and escalation of conflict situations, which appear as the main cause in the emergence of a group of violent crimes, can occur precisely because the parties involved are unable to observe all of this on their own. Thus, the task of the professional involved in conflict management or in the in problem solving – like in case of bullying, family conflict, etc. - is to help the attention of the parties to be diverted from the other person identified as the enemy to the problem itself; this also results in a change in attitudes<sup>3</sup> of the persons involved into the case – including, for example, the classmates of the affected students or even the staff.

This form of conflict management also has the potential to have a long-term impact because it “teaches people that if they formulate their problems differently, learn the language of needs and interests, they will be able to handle their conflicts more effectively, and they will be able to find creative solutions.”<sup>4</sup> In the process, the parties can regain not only their self-esteem, but also their respect for each other as a fellow human being.

Understanding the motivations of the “opponent”, accepting the other, and in most cases even listening to them is not easy in an emotionally charged conflict where the parties have already inflicted countless wounds on each other. As the conflict progresses, the increasingly strong emotional involvement first leads the parties involved to the phase of polarisation, then to the phase of segregation and separation. A clear sign of this is when the parties only hear statements from what the other has to say that support their own negative opinion, and not the common points that provide a possible basis for agreement. In such cases, it often happens that they quickly get to the point of repeating what they have to say, and they have two parallel discussions. These negative experiences will not only increase resentment but also bring the parties to the stage of verbal and even physical separation from the other. In order to move forward, it is important to attain the hearing of those affected, one of the important tools of which is to translate what they have said and make it comprehensible to the other party. If the problem itself becomes the centre of the conversation instead of the other party, you can move on to the actual content issues.

In order for those affected to come to an understanding of the other party, which is even considered to be an enemy, important changes are needed. Understanding the

2 Kertész, 2010, p. 81.

3 Baruch Bush and Folger, 1994 referred by Kertész, 2010, p. 35.

4 See more detailed e.g.: Davis, 1989, pp. 17–24.

other's behaviour is particularly difficult because the parties believe that the reason for the events they have experienced and suffered is in their negative inner characteristic, reprehensible or despicable character traits<sup>5</sup>. It is important to emphasise that understanding the reasons behind the other party's action is not the same as accepting the act itself. In the course of effective conflict management, the other person is accepted as a "fellow human being", not identified with the behaviour of the violator, for example. Recognising that the other party – be it the "bad person" or the victim of the concrete situation – is also a person full of feelings, problems and thoughts is very important in the change that leads to the duality of understanding and forgiveness. As a result, the perpetrator must be able to take responsibility and apologise sincerely, and the victim must be able to forgive. It is characteristic of protracted conflict situations within the social environment that all parties typically contribute to its development.

A very important condition for refraining from committing another norm-breaking behaviour or offending the other party or for moving on from the victim situation is the last element of empowerment – i.e. that the parties are able to draw the necessary conclusions and incorporate them into their future *behaviour* as part of a learning process. Of course, this is also a very important stage in the general process of conflict management, as learning to recognise and formulate the emotions and needs behind one's own and the other's behaviour can be used as a successful conflict prevention and resolution technique.

However, the individual elements are not interchangeable. "Until I am able to listen to the other party, I am not able to understand their needs. As long as I do not know what the consequences of the conflict were for him/her, I cannot assess my role properly in the development of the consequences, and I cannot assess my own responsibility well in this." – writes Tibor Kertész.<sup>6</sup> Until the parties take these steps, the problem cannot be solved, and they will not be able to move on.

Although it may seem easy, understanding our own feelings and honestly exploring the factors behind our decisions is not easy even in adulthood, let alone for young people, who often lack self-awareness or the intention to participate in this process.

Self-awareness is the result of a long process of development. In specific situations, this can be even more difficult, especially if the person in question actually feels responsible. Facing the fact that you have caused pain to the other person, whether intentionally or not, and hurt them, is not easy.

In these processes, the young – but of course the adult – person is also "alone". Sitting opposite the other party they cannot dissolve in his/her peer group, or they have no possibility of withdrawing from the situation or of *dissocialising*. The powerful experience of meeting the victim in person is very decisive in recognising one's own responsibility. Direct communication and the appearance of the parties on the same level also help to recognise the fact of the violation of norms.

5 John and Ang, 1999, pp. 377–387.

6 Kertész, 2010, p. 81.

This generates a different psychological situation in the person than the punishment ‘imposed’ by somebody, even in complete passivity, with which any ‘guilt’ can be immediately neutralised and thus ruled out<sup>7</sup>. The so-called neutralization techniques<sup>8</sup> are often used by humans. This helps to explain why they have the right to a particular action; make their behaviour acceptable to themselves, reduce their remorse or guilt. However, a communication-focused alternative conflict management technique is able to eliminate this method and reduce its power, since the person – including the participating child or young person – participates in the process with his/her entire personality.

However, it would be even more effective if the parties did not reach a situation where their conflicts – due to their escalation – can only be resolved with external help.

It would be desirable if the members of the community would be acquainted with and learn as many techniques or theories as possible that would make it easier for them to understand the reasons behind the actions of others, and to recognise emotions and needs.

However, frequently – also in the case of acts that violate the norms – it is difficult even to accept that “such a thing” can happen at all! However, as the creators of the “Swiss cheese model”<sup>9</sup> used in other areas point out, for example, that negative events can actually happen as a result of the interplay of individual mistakes. Looking at reality in a complex and systemic way, it has several components that build on each other, which, however, can carry active or latent errors. (The latter only causes problems in the case of the non-normal operation of the system, for example in a crisis situation.)

That is to say, like thinly sliced Swiss cheese, which contain countless holes – which are usually not even visible from the outside. However, we generally cannot see through the cheese slices lined up one after the other – no matter how much we glance through the empty parts of the first slice of Emmentaler. Our gaze is absorbed by the next pieces. Exceptionally, it can happen that the material-deficient parts of the slices partially overlap, so our gaze – albeit in a small part – passes through the individual layers without hindrance.

Borrowing Reason’s theory into a social context, it can be stated that the deficiencies or errors in the functioning of the strata of society that are built on each other and are endowed with ever wider powers in terms of intervention and protection – family, school, the immediate or wider environment, youth protection, family support, child protection, guardianship authority, and the bodies responsible for public safety – can be found in a specific case in such a way that there is no one who can neutralise the activity of the young norm-violator – as opposed to the previous numerous occasions where it was neutralised by colliding with one of the above elements.

7 Lockie, Sonnenfeld and Fisher, 2014, p. 242.

8 See more detailed about the theory in: Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019, pp. 1260–1285.

9 See more detailed about the theory in: Rausand and Haugen, 2020.

### 3. Understanding Myself

The key to the long-term positive effect of the communication-centred alternative conflict management methods can be grasped in their “learning process” nature. An important prerequisite for drawing lessons is to understand the emotions and needs behind the individual’s own actions. In particular, transformative mediation, which focuses on the process of change, can be considered a kind of self-knowledge “session” in many cases. It is an indisputable fact that as long as those affected do not understand themselves, they cannot be open and understanding towards others.

It can be a very serious challenge if an individual’s image of himself/herself is damaged. A crisis situation can bring to the surface qualities and character traits hidden in the dark (unknown) area, which are sharply opposed to the affected person’s previous self-image. But anyone can experience a specific dispute, workplace conflict, school bullying, integration problems, or bad family patterns, anyone can experience such a crisis situation in which their reactions differ from their usual behaviour. This seriously damages their self-image, their opinion of themselves, and their belief that they are fundamentally a positive person.

In order to move forward, it is very important to understand what triggered such intense experiences in them, what emotional needs were hurt by the other person’s behaviour or messages.

But the individual also finds themselves in a difficult situation if there is a contradiction between their actions and his/her undertaken/professed values. The individual tries to resolve this experienced, sensed dissonance as a rational being, on a cognitive level<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the damage to one’s self-image, the further strengthening of logical contradictions or the anxiety arising from the situation can be avoided or reduced by either changing one’s own *behaviour* or environment, or by seeking new knowledge capable of suppressing dissonance. Consequently, the latter two cases are commonly invoked by those who, in a heightened emotional state or heavily involved in a conflict situation, behave in a way that is far from the value and norm order they consider important.

Other techniques that support general cognition also help to explore the individual’s self-knowledge, and at the same time to understand what may be behind the conflict with the environment. For example, Uffe Elbaek’s public opinion barometer<sup>11</sup> provides an answer to the question of how different an individual’s image of himself/herself is compared to how his/her environment perceives him/her. While these are between people, the difference between the actual and the desired external image can generate an internal conflict.

With the help of the model, the most important characteristics of the individual and the tendencies of change can be determined very plastically. Its essence is that

10 N. Kollár, 1998, p. 56.

11 Krogerus and Tschäppeler, 2008, pp. 28–29.

four important questions must be answered: a) How do you see yourself?; b) How would you like to see yourself?; c) How do others see?; d) How do you want others to see you?

The value of 10 should be marked in a divided way as an immediate answer to how communal or individualistic a person is, whether he/she pays more attention to content or form, or, for example, whether the body (the outside) or the mind (the inside) is more important to him/her. They should be conducted using each of the four approaches above.

The projection of the sets drawn on the basis of the connected figures on each other makes the difference between each – the real and desired – image, the area of the deviation clear to the respondent, and also provides a direction for change. (As the test can be completed several times, it not only shows the trend, but also provides feedback on the effectiveness of the tool used to achieve the goal.)

## Bibliography

- Baruch Bush, R.A., Folger, J.P. (1994) *The Promise of Mediation: Responding to Conflict Through Empowerment and Recognition*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Davis, A.M. (1989) 'The Logic Behind the Magic of Mediation' *Negotiation Journal*, 1989/5, pp. 17–24.
- Forgó, S. (2011) *A kommunikáció elmélet alapjai*. Eger: Eszterházy Károly Főiskola.
- Kaptein, M., van Helvoort, M. (2019) 'A Model of Neutralization Techniques' *Deviant Behavior*, 40(10), pp. 1260–1285; <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1491695>.
- Kertész, T. (2010) *Mediáció a gyakorlatban*. Miskolc: Bíbor Kiadó.
- Krogerus, M., Tschäppeler, R. (2008) *The Decision Book. Fifty Models For Strategic Thinking*. London: Profile Books Ltd.
- Lockie, S., Sonnenfeld, D.A., Fisher, D.R. (eds.) (2014) *Routledge International Handbook of Social and Environmental Change*. Oxon–New York: Routledge.
- N.Kollár, K. (1998) 'Kognitív disszonancia és az elégtelen jutalom pszichológiája', *Iskolakultúra*, 1998/10, pp. 56–67.
- John, N.G., Ang, S. (1999) 'Attribution Bias: Challenges, Issues and Strategies For Mediation'. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 16(4), pp 377–387
- Rausand, M., Haugen, S. (2020) *Risk Assessment. Theory, Methods, and Applications. Statistics in Practice*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.