

Communication Styles, Importance of Congruence Communication

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ABSTRACT

Communication styles can be categorised in countless ways. This chapter presents one of the most important models. Aggressive, passive, or assertive behaviour can be described using important communication characteristics. Recognising these is important not only to help professionals identify them more easily, but also to highlight, through a few examples, the key importance of communication in the social integration and socialisation process of young people, as well as in terms of their subsequent turning into perpetrators or victims. The individual factors in this complex system of relationships influence each other both directly and indirectly. A similarly bidirectional mechanism of action appears in the assessment of the authenticity of communicational interaction.

At the same time, the level of children's communication skills – or their impairment or lack thereof – in itself influences the extent to which and the success with which they will be able to exercise their guaranteed children's rights.

KEYWORDS

communication styles, assertive communication style, aggressive communication style, passive communication style, congruent communication, incongruent communication

Human communication has countless unique characteristics. Depending on which elements we focus on, there are several possible ways to categorise it.

1. Communication Styles and Human Behaviour

One of the best-known models defines individual behaviour based on two characteristics, the most important manifestation of which is communication. On the one hand, how communicative a person is, and on the other hand, how attentive they are to the interests and needs of others. Accordingly, four main types can be identified: passive, aggressive, assertive, and passive-aggressive communication behaviour. Based on the

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significance on the field of professional activities¹, the chapter is focusing on the first three styles.

The passive – submissive – person ignores or subordinates his/her own needs and rights to those of others. They either do not express them or, if they do, they do so in a timid, apologetic way that is not taken seriously by others or they do not understand what they are trying to say. The reasons for this can be found in both verbal communication (e.g. “...but only do what you think is right”) and non-verbal communication (e.g. shrugging shoulders, avoiding eye contact). The passive person has low self-esteem and allows himself/herself to be taken advantage of by others. This behaviour provides an opportunity to avoid, hide or postpone the conflict.

An assertive person stands up for his/her rights and expresses his/her needs, problems and thoughts, but does not violate the rights and feelings of others and takes into account the needs of others. His/her communication is clear and firm, he/she uses the first person singular. Accordingly, he/she will engage in conflict when necessary, as he/she considers it important for the development of a relationship between equals.

A person with aggressive behaviour believes that his/her own rights, feelings, needs and ideas are more important than those of others, and tries to assert them at all costs, even at the expense of others. The person’s communication is characterised by the use of rude, sarcastic or even derogatory language. He/she tends to subordinate others; may ‘lord it over’ his/her subordinates or family members, insisting on having the last word. He/she takes up conflict situations and aims to emerge victorious, even to the total exclusion of the other’s point of view.

1 This is true for communication between professionals regardless of their field, whether it be education, public administration, or healthcare. See for example: Csemáné Váradi and Csema, 2018, pp. 29–38; Csemáné Váradi, 2014, pp. 9–269; Szőke-Milinte, 2006.

Table 1. The characteristics of different behavior models²

	PASSIVE	AGRESSIVE	PASSIVE-AGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
Actions	Keeps quiet Puts himself down Apologizes for self-expression Hides their disagreement Inconveniences himself	Expresses themselves over others Belittles or dismisses others Ignores, insults or attacks others' opinions	Denies personal responsibility Covert aggression Sarcastic Agrees to avoid discussion then looks for ways to defect on the agreement	Directly expresses needs, wants and feelings Expects others to be equally open and honest Accepts different opinions without dismissing them
Looks	Makes themselves small Looks down and hunches over Avoids eye contact Speaks softly	Makes themselves large Looks threatening Penetrating eye contact Loud	Similar to passive	Relaxed Comfortable body language Frequent eye contact (but not glaring)
Beliefs	My needs are less important than others' I don't have as many rights as others My contributions are not as valuable as others'	My needs are more important and justified than others' I have more rights than others My contributions are more valuable than others'	My needs come first, but I can't express that openly I am not responsible for my actions I am entitled to get it my own way, even if I made different commitments	My needs are equally important as others I have equal rights We both can make valuable contributions I am responsible for my behaviour
Emotions	Fear of rejection Helplessness and low self-esteem Frustration Resentment towards others who "use me"	Anger Powerful (or still angry) when winning over others Later, potentially remorseful for mistreating others	Fear of rejection if being direct or assertive Resentful of people's demands and power Fear of being controlled	Positive feelings about self Positive feelings about socializing with others Good self-esteem
Goals	Avoid conflict Please others (no matter at what cost to me) Let others take control (including of my actions)	Win at any costs Control others Always make sure others know who's in charge	Get it my way, without taking responsibility Get it my way, but without having to assert myself	Express himself Find an agreement Keep fair boundaries of mutual respect

Authenticity as a basic tenet

However, whichever communication style we choose, its success depends largely on how well we can present ourselves as credible professionals.

2. Congruency and Communication

The extent to which I feel the other party's communication is credible or not is similarly a determining factor in the development of a conflict situation and the choice of the management style to be used. A person who repeatedly looks at his/her watch and yawns in the guest room, even though telling the hostess at the end of the evening that he/she had a fantastic time, will not be believed.

2 Author's own work based on Paterson, 2002.

According to Carl Rogers' theory, authenticity and *congruence* are crucial in people's relationships with each other. It is the harmony of experience, mind and communication. Thus, if there is a discrepancy between the behaviour and the content of communication, the communication loses credibility and incongruence ensues³.

The more congruent and authentic a person's (X) experience, consciousness and communication, the more likely the other party (Y) is to perceive it as pure communication and respond to it more clearly.

The harmony between X's experience, consciousness and communication is important not only because what he/she says is more believable to Y, but also because if X is congruent, he/she will not use self-protective (defensive) techniques (such as distorting reality to suit his/her self-image) and will be more able to pay attention to Y's communication.

In this way, Y presents the image of an accepting, understanding communication partner, and thus Y opens up more and more, communicates more and more authentically, and is less and less likely to be defensive.

It will also make X feel empathetically understood and accepted, communication will become freer, and there will be fewer and fewer conflict situations in the relationship between the two people.

This chain reaction can be interrupted by the emergence of a new factor, a threatening element, to which one of them (e.g. X) cannot react credibly; as a consequence, X will not be able to pay full attention, his/her behaviour will become defensive, his/her communication will lose clarity and the process will reverse.

If two people are assumed to wish to be in contact, to be able and willing to understand each other, and to maintain a relationship for a period of time, then the greater the congruence between one person's experience, consciousness and communication (the person receiving the information is the real determinant), the more likely they are to form a relationship in which they communicate more and more authentically with each other; understand each other more and more; are increasingly adaptable to changing circumstances, and become more satisfied with their relationship.

Conversely, the greater the incongruence between lived experience and the conscious communicated information, the more likely it is that a relationship will be established in which participants' communication is not improving, they understand each other less and less, adapt less and less effectively to changing circumstances, and feel worse and worse about themselves⁴.

This can have a serious negative impact on those affected, both interpersonal interactions and communication within the organization. The loss of credibility can happen very quickly, but its regaining (or building) is the result of a long period of work. In both processes, the quality of the person's communication is decisive.

3 See more detailed in: Csemáné Váradi and Gilányi, 2010.

4 See more details: Rogers, 2003.

3. Self-Awareness and Communication Model

The precondition for sending authentic messages with the same content and mutually reinforcing messages is to accept the fact that our self-knowledge and self-image are necessarily incomplete, even if we make serious efforts to reveal them.

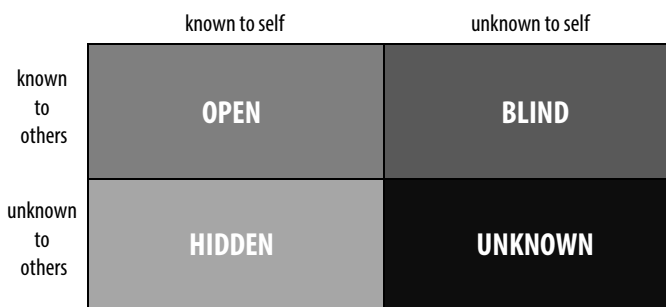
One reason for failure and loss of credibility is ignoring human nature, which can be described using Luft and Inkham's *self-awareness and communication model* and the social mirror theory.

The essence of the former theory is that we must distinguish between how we see ourselves and how others see us. Our personality has a so-called open area, which we know well and which we allow others to see. Although our hidden self, our thoughts and feelings, are well known, we try to keep them secret in human communication. The main point of the second theory (social mirror theory) is, that self-awareness develops through reflection on social interactions and shared experiences, in which interpersonal interactions, especially communication, play an extraordinary role⁵.

It is the fact, that the parties (partners or enemies) often forget that the other does not necessarily see and know the same thing about them, what they want others to see or know. Just as it is true that others do not necessarily see the person as what they want to show themselves to be.

According to the model known as the JOHARI window⁶, there are four areas of the personality that are known and desired to be shown to the outside world and to ourselves in different depths. However, the individual knows only two of these areas: the open one, which they wish to share with their environment, and the closed (hidden), which they do not. For example, there are those qualities that the other person does not want to reveal at all, or depending on the other person, the situation, etc., they do not want to reveal to the other party.

Figure 1. The Johari Window model⁷



⁵ See more further details in: Csemáné Váradi and Gilányi, 2010.

⁶ Polacsek, 2011, pp. 17–19.

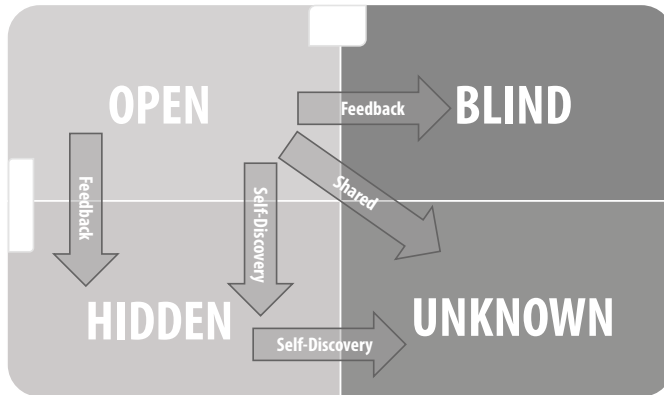
⁷ Author's own work.

Additionally, this also means that everyone – although in varying proportions – exercises power over only one part of their personality⁸. The peculiarity of the remaining areas is that while the blind area is known to others, the dark (unknown) part is concealed from everyone.

So we all have an unknown area that remains hidden from both ourselves and others. In crisis situations and disasters, both our positive and negative traits can come to the fore and surprise us⁹. This is how ordinary people can become heroes in times of disaster or accident, or even cruel murderers, for example in cases of romantic disappointment.

Which element of the personality dominates has an impact on the assertiveness of the person concerned, or on the typical conflict management strategy to be used. The proportions can be changed, consciously shaped with the help of various techniques.

Figure 2. The development-techniques of 'hidden' part of personality¹⁰



The metacommunication messages sent through the blind area without the individual's "knowledge" and against their will can easily lead to conflicts, especially if they contradict their verbal communication or the qualities they want to show in the open area. That is, when harmony is broken and congruence suffers. However, the boundaries of each area are shifting. Their situation depends on the current partner, the relationship with them, the situation, previous general experiences, as well as the psychological well-being of the person concerned.

It remains true too, that we can judge the effectiveness of our communication primarily based on feedback from our environment. The essence of *social mirror theory*¹¹ is that an individual's efforts to share the image they have of themselves are successful if they receive corresponding feedback from those around them. (But the

⁸ Whitehead, 2001, pp. 3–36.

⁹ Source: Gardiner, 2023.

¹⁰ Author's own work.

¹¹ Whitehead, 2010, pp.

mirror as a tool can have a special role in connection with building self-knowledge, strengthening the empathy-sensitivity or emotion-managing. For example “mirror meditation, which involves meditating by looking in a mirror, can increase self-compassion and relieve stress”.¹²⁾

It is important to point out that a new interpretation of the social mirror theory is also becoming more and more widespread. According to this, the image coming back from the outside world is nothing more than the reflection of our inner self. This approach is primarily about increasing self-knowledge rather than striving to get to know others.

Whether we succeed in presenting the image of the person we want to be, whether our change in this direction is successful, depends to a large extent on the awareness of our behavior, the level of self-awareness and communication competencies. All of these elements can be developed¹³ – whether it is an adult professional or a child.

12 Giotakos, 2021, pp. 187–195.

13 Bongioanni, 2024.

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