

How Does Communication Work?

If we look back in our communication biographies, we often remember particularly well the moments when communication did not work. Whether in private or in professional life, misunderstandings, conflicts, and confusions remain in our memory. In situations where communication works smoothly, it is usually not even noticed. In order to understand how communication works (whether well or badly), it is worthwhile to look at communication theory models, such as Paul Watzlawick's Five Axioms of Communication.

Paul Watzlawick's Five Axioms of Communication

1. One cannot *not* communicate.

The first axiom shows that everything that one does or does not is a message. Let us take a situation in a waiting room, for example. In the waiting room, one person is already sitting and looking out of the window when a second person enters. The first person does not react, but continues to look out of the window. And although she may not be actively or consciously communicating at that moment, she is still sending a message to her counterpart. How this is interpreted depends on the other person:

- "I don't feel like talking."
- "I can't talk."
- "I don't want to be disturbed."

"Activity or inactivity, words or silence all have message value: they influence others and these others, in turn, cannot *not* respond to these communications and are thus themselves communicating" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 1)

In the same way, the reaction to it also contains a message: the person, having just entered, can leave the room again, he can say "Hello" loudly, he can sit down silently on a chair and also look out of the window. He cannot *not* react.

Experiment

Whether in the cafeteria or at home in the dining room - try not to communicate for once. Preferably try this with someone you know, and exchange views on the situation afterwards. The prerequisite is that both parties are aware of the presence of the other.

2. There are both content and relationship levels of communication

The content level of communication contains all information.

The relationship statements are about one or several of the following assertions:

- "This is how I see myself."
- "This is how I see you."
- "This is how I see you seeing me."

The relationship level therefore determines "how this communication is to be taken" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 3). This relationship information is expressed through facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc. The relationship aspect is always above the content aspect and influences it. If there is a negative relationship, the communication on the content level is often disturbed and not constructive. For example,

- Two people in a seminar group do not like each other. One of them always devalues the other's contributions to the discussion.
- A new working group needs time to get to know each other and build a relationship.

Uncertainties in the relationship always influence the factual level and thus the work. Working on the relationship level can, we know from experience, sometimes be more difficult and sometimes easier. Often it is easier with people who are similar to us in certain respects, with whom we can possibly also be friends in private. Especially in intercultural groups, this work on the relationship level takes on a special meaning, because you cannot take things for granted.

3. The nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the partners' communication procedures.

The third axiom is introduced with two examples:

The teacher is strict with the class because the students hardly cooperate actively. The students hardly ever speak up because the teacher is so strict.



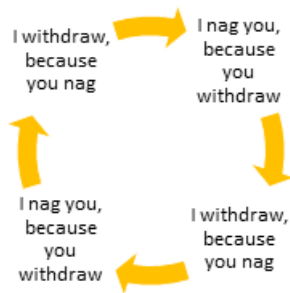
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"I don't trust you because you don't talk to me about your feelings."

"I only talk about my feelings with people who do not trust me."

Communication is always stimulus **and** response. But participants punctuate their communicative contributions differently – they always see themselves reacting to something.



I am moving back because you are nagging all the time. If you would keep talking to me and not withdraw, I wouldn't nag you. A classic vicious circle in everyday communication.

The causal connection is experienced completely differently as everyone has their subjective perception of the situation. In the end the actual starting point cannot be determined anymore

4. Communication can be both digital and analogue

The fourth axiom sounds more complicated than it is. By digital means, we mean speech. Analogue, on the other hand, refers to all non-verbal or para-verbal means, such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone of voice, and melody. Language is used to convey information clearly and with little room for interpretation. Here we are again at the factual level of Axiom 2. Non-verbally, on the other hand, communication takes place between the lines - primarily about the relationship.

Example

You can say the sentence „Wow, you did a great job!“ spontaneously in five completely different ways and with five completely different attitudes using the exact same words – but differences with facial expressions, gestures or vocal means.

6. Communication is either symmetrical or complimentary

Communication is complimentary in situations in which the parties involved are not equal but one party has the power of the situation. Situations in which the participants meet at eye level are symmetrical.

Especially in a professional or university context, conversational situations are often complementary.

Example

Who is right now in the example above (from the perspective of constructivist didactics)?

Everyone constructs their own reality, e.g. the nagging person and the one who tries to escape, as an example. Neither is wrong. They both have their perception of reality - their reality. Arguing about it usually does not lead to a solution. Why should either of them admit that they are wrong when they are not?

The root of many everyday conflicts and misunderstandings can be found - viewed from the outside - in these axioms. However, if you are in the middle of it, it sometimes takes some effort and self-reflection, perspective-taking and even more communication to understand which mechanisms influence the situation – especially in emotional moments.

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