Four Communication Orientations

Purpose, relationship, and judgment in everyday communication

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Abstract

What people hope to accomplish in an exchange should guide how they choose to respond to one another. The Four Communication Orientations model distinguishes four purposes: sustaining a relationship, shaping an outcome together, establishing that one was right, and seeing a preferred outcome prevail. Either participant may move among these purposes as an exchange unfolds. Drawing on research on negotiation, procedural justice, motivated reasoning, and employee voice, this paper examines how those choices shape subsequent participation. The implications for leadership are especially consequential when one person has the authority to decide what happens after another speaks.

When I was in graduate school, my professor Len Hawes would ask us, “What do you want?” After we answered, he would ask, “Okay, now what do you really want?” The second question was harder. I might want a better price and want the seller to feel good about doing business with me again. As long as I could have both, it was easy to say that both mattered. Preparing for the negotiation meant deciding what I would do if one more concession on price began to cost me something in the relationship.

Hawes taught us to prepare the way a chess player prepares, thinking several moves ahead. If I made a particular offer, what response might it invite? What choices would each of us have then? He drew our attention to the word manipulate and its connection to mano, the Spanish word for hand. Both words trace back to the Latin manus, meaning “hand.” What stayed with me was the sense of agency in that image. The next move was mine to make. The other person’s response was theirs, and part of my preparation was to consider what my move would ask of them.

If preserving the relationship mattered most, that priority had to show up somewhere in my choices, perhaps in my willingness to accept a price I knew I could press lower. If the price mattered most, I could say what I was prepared to pay and give the seller room to decline. Their dignity mattered in either case. A seller who can explain what a lower price would require of them may tell me something I need to know. We might find terms neither of us had considered, or part with a clearer understanding of why we could not agree.

I return to Hawes’s second question because our purposes sometimes become clear to us only when another person answers. I can ask a friend for her judgment and discover, when she disagrees with me, how much I wanted her agreement. She faces a choice of her own about whether to press the point or let it go. The Four Communication Orientations grew out of my interest in what each of us wants at that moment, what we are willing to give priority to, and what our choices teach us about one another.

Word origins: Online Etymology Dictionary, “manipulate”; Real Academia Española, “mano.”

The unit of analysis is an exchange

What would count as a good outcome for me in this interaction?

An orientation is the purpose that gives a particular response its direction. The relevant unit may be smaller than a conversation. A manager can open a meeting seeking advice, encounter an unexpected challenge, and spend the next several minutes establishing that she anticipated the problem. Although the subject and the participants remain the same, the answer that would satisfy her has changed. A person's account of that change, the sequence of responses, and the colleague's experience each supply evidence about a different aspect of the exchange.

Two judgments organize the model. The first concerns the weight given to the relationship: what claim does our ability to remain in contact, work together, or repair an injury have on my response here? The second concerns the weight given to the substantive result. To make that judgment, participants must specify the matter before them. Whether a client can rely on a comparison is one matter. Whether the manager foresaw the difficulty is another. If every personally desired outcome counted as the substantive result, the distinction between securing a defensible finding and securing an acknowledgment of foresight would disappear.

	PRIORITY GIVEN TO THE SUBSTANTIVE RESULT	
	Lower	Higher
Higher relationship priority	**Connection** Harmony	**Collaboration** Cooperation
Lower relationship priority	**Contention** Being Right	**Competition** Winning

The axes locate relative priorities. They cannot, on their own, establish a purpose. Giving little weight to either concern might also reflect exhaustion, withdrawal, or a judgment that someone else should decide. Contention requires the further investment in being right. The quadrants describe four recognizable orientations within a larger range of human responses. Rahim's (1983) conflict styles concern the weight parties give to their own and others' concerns. Here, an analyst can defend a client's interest while giving little immediate weight to preserving agreement with her manager. Specifying whose relationship and which result are at issue is a prerequisite for interpreting the axes.

Connection and the work of repair

What would count as repair from the position of the person interrupted?

Consider a manager who has promised a client a set of findings by Friday. On Wednesday an analyst explains that one comparison will take until Monday to verify. The manager cuts her off. Later that afternoon the client agrees to receive the comparison separately. The practical difficulty appears to have passed. For the analyst, something remains unresolved. She had been responsible for the accuracy of a finding and had been unable to finish explaining why she doubted it.

Connection gives priority to the relationship and takes harmony as its desired outcome. Here the manager might return to the interruption: “I cut you off this morning. What were you trying to tell me?” Much depends on whether she can hear an answer that implicates her. The analyst might say that she raised the concern twice and that, after the second interruption, she stopped trying. A quick assurance that they are on good terms would give the manager relief. Hearing what it took for the analyst to try a second time could give them grounds to work together differently. Harmony can require tolerating disagreement long enough for an injury to receive an adequate account.

Research on negotiation gives this distinction a firmer basis. Curhan, Elfenbein, and Xu (2006) found that negotiators value several aspects of an encounter, including the instrumental outcome, their own standing, the process, and the relationship. The client’s accommodation can settle the delivery question while leaving the analyst with substantial grounds for concern about her standing. A manager who takes relief at the revised deadline as evidence that the relationship has recovered has drawn a conclusion about one outcome from evidence about another.

Bottom et al. (2002) examined the restoration of cooperation after a breach in an experimental setting. Participants responded more favorably when explanations were accompanied by substantive amends. The organizational analogue in this case would be specific to the injury. The manager might return the floor to the analyst at the next review and make clear why the team needs her qualification before the findings go forward. The experiment offers a reason to examine the difference between acknowledgment and amends. Whether the analyst regards either act as repair remains a question for her, and its durability can be examined only in subsequent exchanges.

Collaboration and decision authority

Being heard, influencing a decision, and sharing responsibility for it are distinguishable experiences.

Before the client agrees to a revised schedule, the manager and analyst face a different problem. The manager owns the commitment to deliver on Friday. The analyst bears professional responsibility for the findings. They can identify a question on which each has consequential standing: Which comparisons can we defend, and what qualification must accompany them? The manager can retain authority over the client relationship while sharing judgment about what the evidence warrants.

Vroom and Jago (2007) distinguish decision processes by the participation they afford, including consultation and group decision. A manager may consult extensively, adopt the analyst's advice in full, and make the selection herself. Ansell and Gash (2008) examine how inequalities in power and resources shape collective deliberation in public governance. The setting differs, but the problem carries over: an invitation can be formally open while one participant controls the agenda, the admissible alternatives, and the point at which discussion ends.

Lind, Kanfer, and Earley (1990) varied the timing of voice in a goal-setting experiment with 179 undergraduates. Participants judged the procedure fairest when they could speak before the goal was set. Even an opportunity to speak afterward improved fairness judgments relative to having no voice. This finding complicates the interpretation of an invitation to collaborate. A person can value being heard after a decision has closed. Her favorable assessment of the conversation establishes little, by itself, about her authority over the decision.

For the purposes of this model, Collaboration requires an identifiable matter that the parties can shape together. The most revealing moment in the case comes when the analyst recommends withholding the comparison the client most wants. Can that recommendation alter what goes into the report? Who can resolve an objection, who must own the final judgment, and were those terms intelligible before the analyst spoke? These questions make the distinction open to examination even when everyone is satisfied with the result.

Competition and Contention

What remains at stake once the substantive question has been settled?

Suppose the client must allocate funds on Friday. Omitting the comparison could leave a consequential decision to a guess. Including it could give an unverified figure an authority it will retain long after the caveat has been forgotten. The manager may press for provisional disclosure and the analyst for withholding the figure. Each has understood the other's reasons. They still want incompatible courses to prevail. Competition names that investment in winning a substantive contest. It can arise between people who respect one another and who each have an obligation worth defending. De Dreu, Weingart, and Kwon's (2000) meta-analysis of 28 negotiation studies found that the advantage of prosocial motives for joint outcomes depended on resistance to yielding. Firm advocacy is therefore weak evidence, by itself, of what a participant wants from the relationship.

Power changes what such a contest asks of its participants. The manager may have authority to release the report. The analyst may have to explain its limitations to people who assume she approved it. Dignity has practical implications under these conditions. The manager can state who made the decision, preserve the analyst's qualification in the document the client will actually receive, and accept responsibility for proceeding. These actions leave a disagreement visible and give an accurate account of whose judgment prevailed. They also make it possible to revisit the decision if the evidence changes.

Contention is easiest to discern when the substantive dispute has run its course. The client has accepted a revised schedule. The manager opens last week's correspondence and asks the analyst to read aloud the sentence in which the manager predicted a delay. If a mistaken account is about to enter a performance review, reconstructing the sequence of events serves a material purpose. If the record is accurate and the outstanding satisfaction lies in hearing the analyst concede the point in front of her peers, rightness has become the object of the exchange. The same email can serve either purpose.

Kunda's (1990) review of motivated reasoning offers an account of why this distinction can elude the speaker herself. A preferred conclusion can influence which evidence comes to mind and how readily a plausible explanation is accepted. The manager may sincerely regard the email as decisive while making little effort to retrieve an earlier warning from the analyst. Contention gives that process a particular interpersonal object: acknowledgment of the manager's rightness. Would a private correction suffice? Would evidence that the analyst warned her earlier prompt the manager to revise her account? Her response to disconfirming evidence is more informative than her confidence when she first opens the email.

How a private purpose acquires public consequences

The manager remembers asking a question. The analyst remembers what she needed in order to answer it.

At the next project review, the analyst may wait until she has assembled the messages that establish when she first saw a problem and whom she told. What looks to the manager like another late warning may, from the analyst's position, be a prudent adjustment to the last occasion on which she spoke early. Both people can leave the second meeting with more evidence for their respective judgments. The manager sees a reason to insist on earlier reporting. The analyst sees a reason to arrive with a more complete defense.

The Ecology Loop explains how that history can acquire force. The public request to read the email is a response. The analyst gives it meaning in light of the audience, the manager's authority, and their prior exchanges. Gathering documentation is an adaptation. If similar exchanges recur, preparation for self-defense may become an ordinary condition of raising a concern. Others who witnessed the original exchange can make the same adjustment without ever being its direct subject. Eventually the manager receives a different sample of what her team knows: concerns that have survived the time and effort required to document them.

Both participants exercise judgment. The analyst may challenge the comparison because she wants to keep an unreliable finding out of the report. Once the report is corrected, she may want her manager to acknowledge that she raised the concern in time. The manager, in turn, can accept the correction and still resist that acknowledgment. Their purposes can shift independently. Their authority differs in a consequential way: the manager can decide what goes to the client and what enters the analyst's evaluation. Leadership carries a particular responsibility here because the manager's response can alter the professional cost of the analyst's next choice.

Repair has an observable consequence in this example. At a later meeting the analyst offers an incomplete concern, and the manager acts on the early warning while assuming responsibility for what remains uncertain. Over time the analyst may have reason to speak sooner. She may also continue to wait because another unit releases data late or because the client requires documentation. The ecology is one possible explanation for timing. A credible account must leave room for the working conditions that could produce the same behavior.

What employees learn about speaking

An employee can feel able to speak and still have good reason to doubt that speaking will matter.

The ecological claim concerns a change in participation across encounters. Work on psychological safety and voice identifies several pathways that could produce such a change. Edmondson (1999) found an association between team psychological safety and learning behavior in manufacturing teams. Morrison's (2014) review describes the judgments of risk and efficacy involved in speaking up. Sherf et al. (2021) sharpened the distinction in a meta-analysis and a six-month panel study. Perceived impact was more strongly associated with voice, while psychological safety was more strongly associated with silence. Speaking and withholding can therefore coexist in the same employee.

That distinction matters when interpreting a meeting in which everyone appears to speak freely. The analyst may speak frequently about the verified figures while withholding her concern about the comparison. A count of contributions could make the meeting look participatory. An account of what she knew before the meeting, which concerns she raised, and what she expected would follow would disclose a different pattern. It would also distinguish an expectation of personal cost from a judgment that the decision had already been made.

In a field study and two experiments, Burris (2012) found that managers evaluated employees who voiced challenges less favorably and endorsed their ideas less readily than those of employees whose voice was supportive. Detert and Edmondson (2011) found across four studies that employees hold implicit beliefs about when speaking up is risky or inappropriate. Together these studies identify two distinct possibilities in the case. The analyst may have learned caution from this manager's reactions. She may also have brought expectations formed elsewhere into their first meeting. Establishing local ecological change requires evidence about what she expected beforehand.

For the Leadership Communication Profile, these distinctions favor an interpretive use. Two participants can choose the same response and differ in what they hope it will accomplish. Asking what a colleague could say that would change the decision, and what response would leave the matter unresolved, makes those differences available for discussion. A stable individual score would require separate evidence of reliability and validity.

The question worth asking again

“Okay, now what do you really want?”

Return to the manager who opens last week’s email. She remembers warning the team that the comparison would need another review. She finds the sentence she was looking for. A few lines below it, she finds something she had forgotten. The analyst raised the concern on Tuesday. The warning then sat for two days in an approval process the manager herself had put in place.

What does the manager want now? A moment ago she wanted an accurate account of the delay, and perhaps some acknowledgment that she had seen it coming. She now has the account. The analyst, who has just been asked to reconstruct the week in front of her colleagues, may reasonably want the correction to be heard by the same people who heard the question. The manager might still experience the exchange as an inquiry into the facts. The analyst might experience it as having to establish that she did her job. The same words can serve different purposes, and each person knows something about the exchange that the other can only learn by asking.

What I appreciate about Hawes’s second question is that I can ask it again after I have heard an answer I did not expect. Either person in this exchange has that opportunity. The analyst can decide whether she wants an acknowledgment, a change in the review process, or both. The manager has an additional responsibility. Her account of what happened can become the account by which someone else’s work is judged.

If the manager says, “You raised this on Tuesday. I missed it,” the analyst need no longer spend the meeting establishing when she spoke. They can turn together to the two days when a warning was available and no one acted on it. The next time the analyst notices a comparison she cannot yet verify, she will have this meeting to draw on when she decides how soon to say so.

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