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Center for Cooperative Resolution

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NIH Office of the

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Advanced Communication Skills: *Tips from a Mediator*

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The Keys



The most successful people in the workplace are those who:

- Reflect on their impact on other people
- Consider their potential contribution to a challenging situation
- Are mindful of their own triggers and work to manage their responses to others

What do we mean by “advanced”?

Basic skills

Active listening

Asking helpful questions

Advanced Skills

Working with impact vs. intent, in person and in email

Managing the Ladder of Inference

Navigating dialogue vs. debate



What's happening?

- Paul laughs while he explains why he missed an important deadline.
- Lucinda writes in an email to her supervisor: “Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”
- Keeyon rarely says good morning or good evening to his colleagues.



But I didn't mean it *that way*!






- The **intent** is what a person meant to do.
- The **impact** is the effect it had on someone else.

We can't really know what someone's intentions are. Instead, we make assumptions (and act accordingly) based on:

- The behavior we see
- Our feelings/emotions
- Our filters, perceptions, past experiences
- The relationship we have with the person



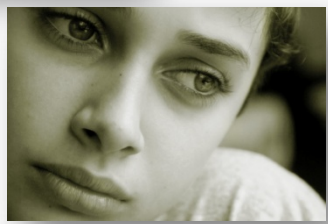
Overall, communication consists of...

Body Language		55%
Paralanguage		38%
Verbal Content		7%

(Mehrabian, 1972)

Especially with:

- *Emotional situations*
- *Message incongruity*
- *People from different groups (i.e. cultures, disciplines, countries).*



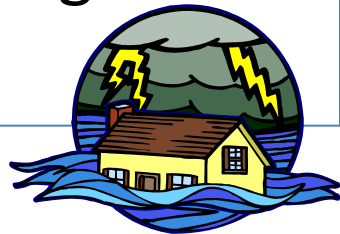
Attribution of Intent

Hostile

- You intended the action because of your personality or personal characteristic

Physical/Emotional Response

- Intensification
- Emotional flooding



Non-Hostile

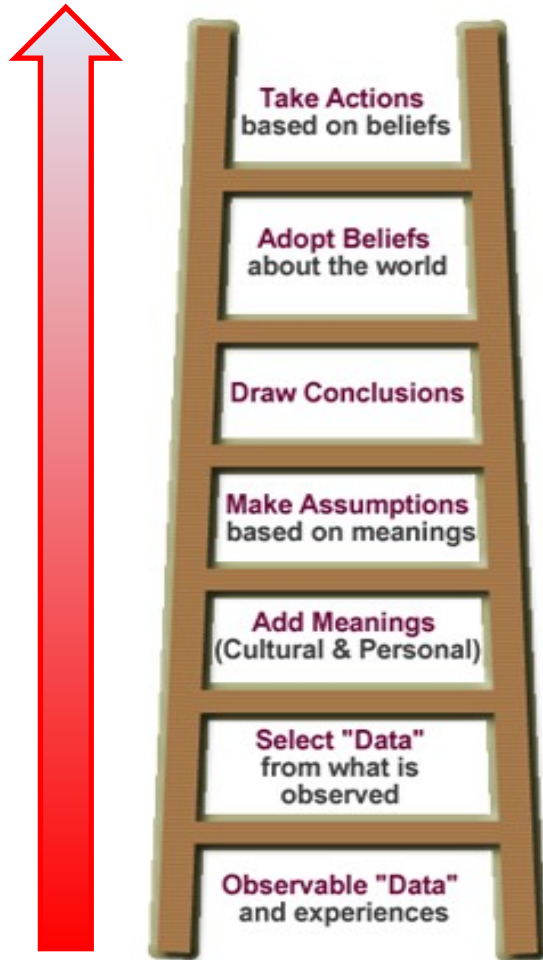
- You did not intend the action
- You simply reacted to something in the situation

Physical/Emotional Response

- De-intensification
- Dissipation



Ladder of Inference



Source: *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Senge et al, 1994.

ASSUMPTION: Take for granted that something is true without verifying it.

INFERENCE: A conclusion drawn about what you *don't* know on the basis of things that you do know.

- Can climb the ladder of inference in seconds, and not even be aware that it's happening.
- You start to create your own causal explanations for what's going on based on your frame, history, filter, worldview, etc.
- Can turn some of your inferences into "facts" that have never been tested or confirmed.
- You then act on that "fact" as if it were true, leading you to behavior that might have been different if you had tested your inferences.



Managing impact vs. intent in conversation

- Explain the thinking behind your questions
- Check for accuracy – make sure you really understand what the other person means
- Ask the other person to expand and/or clarify
- Remember that you might be surprised by feedback you receive – respond to that feedback with curiosity, rather than defensiveness. Try not to take it personally.
- Try to take information/behavior at face value, rather than attributing intent or jumping to conclusions before you've had a chance to check that you are correct.
- Acknowledge the other person's concerns and feelings. If necessary, apologize.

The perils of email

Email does not allow for:

- *Copresence*
- *Visibility*
- *Audibility*
- *Cotemporality*
- *Simultaneity*
- *Sequentiality*

Can lead to...

- Low feedback, reduced social cues
 - No body language, tone
- Weakened social bonds, more anonymity
- Cannot correct/repair in the moment
- Potential for misunderstanding
- Long emails
 - “Bundling”
 - Quoting

Email does allow for:

- *Reviewability*
- *Revisability*

Can lead to...

- Excess attention
 - Rumination
 - Elaborate editing

WHAT NOW?

From: Levine-Finley, Samantha (NIH/OD) [E] [<mailto:levinesa@od.nih.gov>]
Sent: Thursday, November 30, 2012 3:35 AM
To: Linda Myers
Subject: Big Problem

The way you described my database project this morning was really off base. I thought that after all of our meetings you understood the phased way in which the vendor was going to deliver the elements of the database. Instead, this morning you said that the deliverables were late and that the database possibly might not be done before Jan. 1. Plus, you got the name of the vendor wrong, miscalculated the total cost of the project by \$15,000, and just made me look really bad. Have I done something wrong??????

Call me FIRST THING IN THE MORNING. I am going to be at my desk between 8am-10am.

Managing impact vs. intent in email

- Get a second pair of eyes
- Take a breather before responding and/or use the draft function
- Avoid bundling, “flaming” (i.e. all caps, multiple exclamation points/question marks)
- Avoid using email to give critical feedback, settle disputes, or engage in conflict
- Pick up the phone or walk down the hall.



In all cases

- If necessary, apologize via email, over the phone, or in person. Encourage people to let you know they can come to you if they ever feel wronged by you in the future.
- If something has gone awry in communication, especially if the IMPACT was very far off from the INTENT, this might be a sign that the working relationship needs some extra attention.

Dialogue

vs.

Debate

Dialogue is collaborative —two or more sides work together toward common understanding.	Oppositional—two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong .
Because finding common ground is the goal, one searches to find or create a basis for agreement or consensus .	Winning is the goal and one searches for differences and weaknesses .
Creates an open-minded attitude and an openness to being wrong and to change.	Creates a closed-minded attitude and a determination to be right.
One listens to the other side(s) in order to understand , find meaning, and find agreement.	One listens to the other side(s) in order to find flaws and develop counter-arguments.
One searches for strengths in the other positions .	One searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions .
Helps to reveal and re-examine assumptions that may be feeding the conflict.	Defends assumptions as unquestionable .
Opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions because it is structured so that each participant can contribute to the solution .	Defends one's own position as the best solution and excludes other solutions .
Involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend .	Involves countering the other position without regard for feelings or relationships .

Questions and Answers



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