

Fourfold Communication as a Way to Cooperation

Ordinary conversation about trivial matters is often a bit careless. We try to listen and talk simultaneously, although that is very difficult. The exchange of information is fast, there is no time for deeper reflection. We are under peer pressure that we are not fully aware of. We interrupt each other etc.

This is fine when we talk about things where we already agree and when we have good routines to follow. But when we are concerned with problems and conflicts, consultation and disclosure we need a more accurate communication. We need to practice Fourfold Communication, which means four distinct communication skills in a precise order. To stress that we are talking about skills that we have to train in order to succeed, we use the word “deep”:



1. Deep Listening to Others: To listen because we want to understand what the other person really means. In order to do that we must put our values aside and use our imagination and empathy. This is quite easy when we agree with the other person, but most useful when we don't agree. We Deep Listen to Others because we want to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation.



2. Deep Questioning: When all parties have Deep Listened to each other they have the same overview of the important issues at stake. In order to establish a consensus all parties must now ask themselves how important differences can be solved? What can be done in order to meet relevant priorities?



3. Deep Listening to Oneself: When we want to solve difficult issues thinking is not enough. We need to set our preconceived notions aside and listen to our inner guidance for more information and wiser conclusions. All parties in the communication process can make a positive contribution to good solutions, when they take the problems seriously and ponder.



4. Deep Talking: To be honest and also to express feelings in a respectful way. We Deep Talk when we have arrived at good solutions to difficult problems that we want to share. But Deep Talking is also to honestly express confusion or simply say that we don't know, when that is the case. When we Deep Talk our body language is unambiguous – brain, heart and gut agree.



The Sequence: When we practice the four skills above in an appropriate manner – and in the order outlined (clockwise) – we develop. If we ignore one or more of the skills or mix up the order we get poor communication, instead of Fourfold Communication. As a result new problems are likely to arise and old concerns get worse.

Create a good atmosphere for talking

Everyone knows that Fourfold Communication is not easily obtained. In order to get there we must create a climate of trust and reliability. The Communication Thermometer on the next page shows the different levels of communication and trust that we deal with in every day situations, as well as deeper communication processes.

We will now explain the different levels on the Communication Thermometer, starting in the middle. The Zero (No communication) is where we start before we meet for the first time. Plus One (Idealizing) and Minus One (Distrust) is the attitude towards the other party. Our expectations of a meeting have a tendency to be self-fulfilling. A good advice is to approach the other with a slightly positive attitude that can be further developed, as we learn to know each other and build deeper trust.

When we want to evolve a proper Fourfold Communication we must pass and actively deal with all the levels on the positive upper half of the Communication Thermometer. We cannot just jump from Zero to Plus Six or Plus Seven. Plus Two (First meeting) represents the first shallow acquaintance. Here we chit-chat. The purpose is to decide if the other seems to be friendly and if we can take down our guard. At this level we don't raise any concerns. Subjects are neutral, like talk about the weather. It is important to give enough attention to this phase. More than one meeting might be necessary in order to establish a friendly atmosphere. To choose a nice meeting place and provide some good snacks, beverages or food often helps.

Lead the conversation with the help of good rules

After that the first contact is established, it is time to get down to business and we go to Plus Three (Ordinary conversation) on the Communication Thermometer. In order to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations we recommend some rules of the game that the parties agree to in advance:

- Everybody gets a fair share of the time for talking.
- No interruptions are allowed, the parties take turns and listen carefully.
- The listeners focus solely on understanding and don't judge what is said, that comes later.

- When one person has finished talking, the others ask clarifying questions.
- Before the next person speaks the listeners sum up what was said.
- If there are misunderstandings, they are corrected before the next person speaks.

The Communication Thermometer

Communi- cation	Level	Name	Attitude
Good 	+7	Mutual agreement	I create Fourfold Communication
	+6	Fourfold Communication	I listen and I'm eager to learn
	+5	Willing to compromise	I'm open to negotiations
	+4	Worth a struggle	I have a good point
	+3	Ordinary conversation	I'd like to know where we stand
	+2	First meeting	I'd like to know if you are friendly
	Poorly functioning 	+1	Idealizing
0		No communication	I am independent
-1		Distrust	I have a negative attitude to you
-2		Deprecation	I make my demands
-3		Group pressure	I want to turn others against you
-4		Explicit threats	I want to force you
-5		Sanctions	I put pressure on you
-6	Punishment	I invite you to self-examination	
-7	Total control	I take charge of you or the situation	

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The Communication Thermometer shows the different atmospheres and levels of trust that we create.

The rules above might feel awkward in the beginning. And if the meeting hosts many persons the group needs a skilled leader in order to apply them. But without these rules there is a high risk for serious problems and failure. If the parties don't get the same – and whole – picture of the issues at hand and all relevant circumstances, they will not be able to come up with solutions that are good for all concerned and hold for a longer period of time.

Stay calm and explore the disagreements thoroughly

As soon as we do something new and difficult we sooner or later come to a point where we realize that different parties have different interests and opinions. This is level Plus Four (Worth a struggle) on the Communication Thermometer. Here the atmosphere changes. We feel insecure and we may feel that our vital interests are threatened. An urge to escape or to fight and defend ourselves might arise that must be consciously dealt with.

The trick here is to stay calm and to continue the communication with the help of a good structure. We engage in consultation and disclosure because we want to reach an understanding of each parties respective objectives and now the time has come to mutually make those objectives explicit and very clear.

Of utter importance at this stage is also the preparation that each party makes before they speak. Everybody needs to use the skills of Fourfold Communication in order to set their own limits in such a way that they get a proper understanding and respect from the other parties. The questions are:



1. Deep Listening to Others: Have I listened to and understood all relevant facts and circumstances?



2. Deep Questioning: When I have a full picture of the situation and the problems to be solved – exactly what are my limits that lead to respect from self and others?



3. Deep Listening to Oneself: Have I found clear limits and arguments that will most likely withstand a critical review from the other parties?



4. Deep Talking: Do I have the courage to express my standpoints wholeheartedly and in such a way that other people understand, both mentally and empathetically?

Opening up for compromise

Only after each party have made their standpoints clear, is the group ready to look for any practical solutions to the problems at hand. Depending on the situation and the legal framework there will be different opportunities. At level Plus Five (Willing to Compromise) everybody must begin to open up, to be prepared to negotiate the terms for the proposed project.

To negotiate is not new to us, everybody has done that before. But negotiations can lead to bad compromises as well as good ones – and we prefer the latter. So, the question is what we have to do in order to avoid bad compromise? Here are some hints:

1. Secure the quality and honesty of the communication. Don't accept lies, hidden agendas or manipulation of any kind. If that happens, stop, raise your concerns and ask what is going on.
2. Take your time. Don't make decisions too fast. Reflect on the different proposals, ponder, consult friends and allies and sleep on the matter. Hasty positions are bad for everybody.
3. Strive for long term solutions to important issues. It is in everybody's interest that we reach a solution that will be good for all and for a long time.

Search for win-win-solutions

With a proper Fourfold Communication the different parties have a chance to form creative win-win-solutions to major problems and antagonisms. The key difference between compromise and level Plus Six (Fourfold Communication) on the Communication Thermometer, is that on level Six the participants truly look for ideas that are good for everybody concerned. They simply don't want to hurt each other, because they Deep Listen to themselves and seek a deep inner guidance.

When we practice Fourfold Communication we are open to change our minds for the benefit of all – and in ways that were not within our reach with poorer communication. If we find that earlier positions don't hold and should be abandoned for better ideas we don't feel lost. Quite on the contrary, we feel that we have gained important knowledge, security, the respect of others and better relations for the future.

Most people have not been part of a proper Fourfold Communication in a larger group. Ordinary meetings don't have that quality. In order to work sustainably on level Plus Six the meetings must be lead by a trained person that promotes the necessary discipline. Remember: When we ignore one or more of the skills or mix up the order we get poor communication, instead of Fourfold Communication.

Agreeing and building long term trust

On level Seven (Mutual agreement) on the Communication Thermometer, the parties have drawn the best possible conclusions and made their deals. Most of the planning is over and action is taken.

But of course, the need for Fourfold Communication does not stop here. It might even increase, if practical problems come to forefront that were not foreseen. If the parties have both-ered to seriously learn and practice the four communication skills, they are in a good position now. They don't have to be scared when new difficulties arise. They know how to communicate in order to avoid destructive conflicts and are most likely able to sort things out.

To master the highest level on the Communication Thermometer is like being an excellent chef who knows the different recipes for cooking good food, and makes a delicious meal out of almost any ingredients. The same is true when you master Fourfold Communication. You are able to analyze the ongoing communication and suggest and teach a best practice to others who are not yet skilled or even beginners.

The down side of the Communication Thermometer

What we just said about leading others to practice Fourfold communication is true as long as they are open to give it a try. But that is not always the case. The Communication Thermometer is descriptive, and the minus levels symbolize when we use our psychological defences in order to not be affected.

Whether or not we should use the minus levels on the Communication Thermometer deliberately, depends on the situation and the communication skills of all persons involved. If we deal with somebody who does not want to listen and who does not want to promote our own welfare, then minus is not only an option but a necessary.

Minus stands for conflict, but the behaviours on the different minus levels can be both destructive and constructive. The overall trick here is to understand that difference, use minus wisely and to never stop there, but to work things out and finish as high up on the thermometer as possible.

The meaning of distrust and deprecation

Level Minus One (Distrust) stands for a negative attitude towards others. And Minus Two (Deprecation) is when we renounce an open contact because of distrust. It would be wonderful if we lived in a world where there was no need for deprecation, but that is not the case. As a matter of fact deprecation is of utter importance in some situations, see the table below.

	The speaker cheats	The speaker tells the truth
The listener distrust the speaker	A good case: The listener has a critic stance and will investigate the problems.	A bad case: The truthful speaker will lose confidence in the listener.
The listener believes the speaker	A bad case: The speaker deceives the listener, because he or she is too naïve.	A good case: Both speaker and listener are on the right track.

As seen above we want to believe somebody who tells the truth, but we don't want to trust somebody who cheats or lies. The best thing that we can do in order to avoid the pitfalls is to use the skills of Fourfold Communication. Or in other words, don't take a hasty position. Reflect and ask yourself what is right and why. Use reason and don't let spontaneous feelings rule. And if you think that the speaker is not honest, say that in such a way that you can change your mind if you made a mistake. Ask questions, and don't accuse or condemn (unless you are very sure about your conclusions).

Group pressure can be both good and bad

On Minus Three (Group pressure) on the Communication Thermometer the conflict involves more people, and not only the persons who participated when it started. Each side asks for active support from their friends and allies, so that they can put a higher pressure on their antagonists.

What we often forget, is that group pressure can be both positive and negative. It is positive to have a strong group behind our backs when we want to do things that are legitimate, morally right and well motivated – but deal with somebody who is not open to reason, fair play and justice. But the other side of the coin is bullying and worse, when we use peer pressure to force somebody into something bad or violate human rights.

Before we use group pressure we must ask ourselves if we are sure that we are right? What would it feel like to be the other party? Is what we do fair? And are there not better ways to reach our goals? To be under bad group pressure is often a traumatic experience. We want to be a respected part of the groups we interact with.

The difference between good threats and bad threats

On level Minus Four (Explicit threats) we want to force the other to obey our own will. The further down we go on the Communication Thermometer, the more serious things get. Therefore there are rules and legislation about threatening. In many cases good threats must have some kind of legal support and only authorities are allowed to use them. And it is a crime to use threats in bad ways. But still, in some situations threats are necessary in order to stop a bad behaviour.

Generally speaking, there are a number of things that characterize constructive threats. Firstly the reasons for threatening must be well motivated and legitimate. Secondly, the sanction – what will happen if the other does not obey – must be right and proportionate, not too hard but also not too weak. Thirdly, the party who threatens must have the resources and the staying power. The first thing that we do when we experience a threat is always to ask ourselves if the threat is real, is it serious? And fourthly, if we are threatening somebody and the person does not care – what do we do then? Do we give up or do we have a plan B?

Sanctions, punishment and total control

The role of level Minus Five (Sanctions), Minus Six (Punishment) and Minus Seven (Total control) in a process of consultation and disclosure is to be a firm framework around the communication. With the help of these measures in the hands of good authorities that impose the legislation we promote a code of conduct that nobody is allowed to violate.

Most of the time we don't think of sanctions, punishment and control as very relevant. The attitude towards these types of behaviour might even be negative, since it can be very unpleasant and scary to experience strong force. But the truth is that without law and order consultation and disclosure cannot take place. Think of less developed countries where violence and brute force rule.

The most important idea behind consultation and disclosure is that we want to give voice to people and groups that would not be heard or taken into account if the legislation and the authorities were not there. Democracy and civil rights are not a state of nature. They are a cultural innovation that needs awareness and active protection in order to prevail.

Conclusions about good communication when we disclose and consult

There is no guarantee for success when we disclose and consult, but there are a number of insights and advices that might be helpful:

1. **Lowest level rules.** Referring to the Communication Thermometer, the person who chooses the lowest level always sets the level where we are now, and from which we must begin our talking.
2. **The atmosphere when we talk can change very fast – in both directions.** For example if we come to level Plus Four (Worth a struggle), discover that we disagree and one of the parties makes a threat, then we are all on level Minus Four (Explicit threats) and the threat must be dealt with. But the opposite is also true. If somebody makes a

threat that is well motivated and the other party chooses to obey, then we move to level Plus Five (Willing to compromise).

3. **In order to reach sustainable conclusions the parties must communicate at least on level Plus Five (Willing to compromise).** But a very common mistake is to make agreements on level Plus Three (Ordinary conversation) which means that the issues are not well investigated and that one or more of the key persons engaged in the conversation is rather hoping for the best than securing that the best will happen.
4. **If the parties use a proper Fourfold Communication creative solutions for the good of all are more likely to emerge and be accepted.** But that can only happen when all parties are open and willing to have a try. It also takes a professional to lead a group to practice Fourfold Communication, because there are so many pitfalls that must be avoided.
5. **It is important to be familiar also with the minus levels on the Communication Thermometer and to use them wisely.** The minus levels have two constructive purposes. One is to guarantee the rules that make consultation and disclosure a safe process. The other is as a defence, to be used if somebody misbehaves or tries to impose unreasonable demands.

To sum up, a successful process of consultation and disclosure is characterized by both openness and strength. That means that we are open to learning and change if somebody comes up with better ideas – as well that we firmly set our own limits where they must be, in order to have a good self-respect and get the full respect of others. Furthermore, the four skills of Fourfold Communication are very useful when we search for the right balance.

Or put in other words; we need to practice the skills of all the 15 levels of the Communication Thermometer in order to deal with difficult situations as professionals and in private life. But in order to use the minus levels of the Communication Thermometer wisely we must first practice Fourfold Communication and investigate the situation. Only when we know that the other party will not listen if we choose to communicate from plus levels do we choose to go for minus. And only in situations where we are sure that our own point must be made, e.g. when the other does not care about our own rights or his own security, when the other does not want to fulfil his obligations, or when the other does not bother about important circumstances that should be taken into consideration.

This article about communication is written by Eva Grundelius who is a Swedish author and communication consultant. Eva has created The Communication Thermometer and the theory of Fourfold Communication. For further information in Swedish see her latest book "Helt överens! Handbok i hållbar kommunikation" and her webpage: www.hallbarkommunikation.se .