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ONE MESSAGE, FOUR EARS

Why Leaders Are Misunderstood

By Dr. Anthony W. Adams

LEADERSHIP THOUGHT

Before speaking, consider all four sides of your message. When tension appears, explore which side the other person heard.

WHEN A PRACTICAL PROBLEM THREATENS A RELATIONSHIP

Abraham and Lot faced a problem that grew out of their success. Their flocks and herds had become so large that the land could no longer support them together, and their herdsmen began quarreling. What started as competition over resources threatened to become a conflict between relatives.

Abraham recognized the danger and acted before the dispute deepened. He appealed to their family relationship and offered Lot the first choice of where to settle. His response addressed both the practical problem and the relationship at risk (Genesis 13:5–9).

Communication did not create the shortage of resources, but Abraham's communication helped keep that shortage from becoming a deeper relational conflict. Leaders face similar moments when disagreements about schedules, responsibilities, or resources become judgments about motives or character.

The role of a pastor or leader can be deeply rewarding, but managing conflict can also be exhausting. Unresolved conflict can damage relationships, weaken trust, and distract an organization from its mission. Sometimes, by the time a disagreement escalates, neither person can clearly explain how it began.

Conflict may arise from competing priorities, scarce resources, or genuine disagreements. Yet communication—whether missing, inaccurate, or misunderstood—can create conflict or make it worse. Leaders must pay attention to both what they say and how others understand it. I tell my students to ask the questions, **what do I know and what am I making up** because normally, conflict arises from our interpretations or what we think we know.

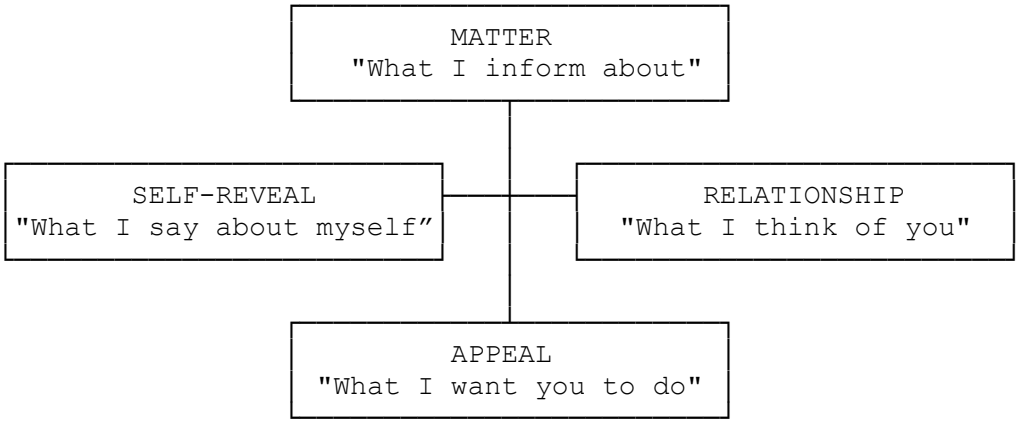
There is a humorous bookstore story that illustrates the problem. Carol, a clerk, liked to use the expression, "the body" to refer to a congregation. One day some church members came to the bookstore and purchased birthday gifts for their pastor, John. The next week he visited the store and described the surprise party his church had given him. Delighted, Carol exclaimed, "Oh, John, I just love your body!" Customers laughed, while Carol and

John were startled. Her intended meaning was affectionate appreciation for his congregation; her words suggested something quite different.[1] The point is what we say can have unintended interpretations and consequences. Communication is not just about what someone says, but it is about what the other person hears.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ONE MESSAGE

Psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun's Four-Sides Model, also called the Four-Ears Model, offers a way to examine such misunderstandings. It proposes that a message carries four dimensions: **facts, self-revelation, relationship, and appeal.** A speaker may emphasize one dimension while a listener responds to another.[2]

Imagine a simple statement: *"The light is green."* (Said by a passenger to the driver at a traffic light). Here is how it breaks down across the four sides:



1. Factual Matter (The Blue Side 💙)

- **Definition:** The plain data, facts, and statements being delivered.
- *Example ("The light is green"):* The traffic signal is currently displaying the color green.

2. Self-Revealing (The Green Side 💚)

- **Definition:** What the sender unintendedly or intendedly reveals about their own personality, state of mind, values, or current needs.
- *Example ("The light is green"):* "I am in a hurry," or "I am paying attention to the road."

3. Relationship (The Yellow Side 💛)

- **Definition:** How the sender views the receiver and their relationship. This is heavily influenced by body language, tone of voice, and formulation.
- *Example ("The light is green"):* "You need my help driving," or "I am watching over you."

4. Appeal (The Red Side ❤️‍🩹)

- **Definition:** What the sender wants the receiver to do, think, feel, or believe. It is the hidden or explicit directive.
- *Example ("The light is green"):* "Drive!" or "Accelerate!"

Note: Each color in Friedemann Schulz von Thun's model represents one of the four distinct layers packed into a single message:

Consider a supervisor saying, “I noticed you left right at five yesterday.”

Dimension	What the message might convey
Facts	“You left work at five o’clock.”
Self-revelation	“I was concerned about finishing the project.”
Relationship	“I question your commitment to the team.”
Appeal	“Please stay later when we have an approaching deadline.”

These are possible interpretations, not established intentions. For example, the supervisor may have been checking availability while the employee heard criticism and thus replied, “I worked my full schedule. Am I supposed to feel guilty for going home?” When examining this statement, the result was the observation became an argument about commitment. In this instance the misinterpretation or misunderstanding took place within the dimension of relationship.

USING THE MODEL BEFORE CONFLICT DEVELOPS

The Four-Sides Model can also help leaders plan a conversation *before* tension develops. These four questions apply the model to everyday leadership:

Facts: Have I stated the situation clearly and accurately?

Self-revelation: Have I explained my concern rather than making others guess?

Relationship: What might my wording and tone communicate about how I view this person?

Appeal: Have I made the requested action clear?

For example, “We need to talk about your performance” leaves considerable room for anxiety and interpretation. A more deliberate message would be: “Two reports were submitted after the deadline this month (💙). I’m concerned because those delays affect our billing schedule (💚). I’d like to understand what is getting in the way and agree on a workable plan for submitting the next report on time (❤️).” Here the speaker has used the dimensions of Facts, Self-Revelation, and Appeal.

Every conversation need not include four explicit statements, and clear communication cannot guarantee agreement. The goal is to anticipate how our words may be understood and reduce avoidable misunderstanding.

Before speaking, consider all four sides of your message. When tension appears, explore which side the other person heard.

CLOSING THE COMMUNICATION GAP

Returning to the supervisor’s comment about leaving at five, a clearer approach would be: “Yesterday, we needed help with the project after five. I realize I hadn’t discussed that with you beforehand. Could we talk about your availability when future deadlines require additional coverage?” This explains the concern, acknowledges the missing conversation, and makes the request explicit.

A simple way to remember the challenge is:

Communication Gap = Intended Meaning – Understood Meaning

This equation is a teaching aid and is not a part of Schulz von Thun’s model. However, what it reminds us of is to ask whether the meaning we intended matches the meaning someone received. Communication is not just about what someone says. An equally vital component is also what the other person hears or receives.

James 1:19 calls us to listen readily, speak thoughtfully, and be slow to anger. Eugene Peterson's The Message expresses this vividly: "Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear."[3] That is valuable counsel for leaders facing a tense conversation.

THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE CONFLICT ESCALATES

Before speaking: What do I want this person to understand and do?

When tension appears: What might they have heard about how I view them?

Before assuming: Have I checked their meaning with a question?

Checking meaning means confirming someone's intention before treating our interpretation as fact. **Again, what do I know and what am I making up?** In the workplace example, the employee might assume, "My supervisor thinks I'm lazy." Instead of defending against that assumption, the employee could ask, "Are you asking about my availability after five, or was there something you needed help with yesterday?"

The supervisor might explain, "A customer called just after you left, and I wanted to know who could provide coverage." The conversation can now address coverage rather than become an argument about character.

Leaders also need to check their interpretations, too. When an employee says, "That deadline isn't realistic," a leader may hear resistance. By asking, "What makes the deadline difficult—the amount of work, available resources, or competing priorities?" this may reveal an obstacle the leader has overlooked.

Tone matters. "What did you mean by that?" can sound confrontational. "I want to make sure I understand. Are you concerned that we haven't allowed enough time?" invites clarification. Treat your interpretation as a possibility to explore, not a fact to defend. One other note: make sure your tone is not patronizing or condescending. People do not like to feel they are being handled or talked down to.

Good communication requires intentionality. A moment spent clarifying meaning can prevent hours spent repairing relationships. Before responding to the message you think you heard, make room to discover the message the other person intended. Sometimes four ears are better than two.

SOURCES

1. Bookstore anecdote adapted from "Tim's Treasures," Blue Ridge Christian News, January 2024.

2. Schulz von Thun Institut, "Das Kommunikationsquadrat." schulz-von-thun.de/die-modelle/das-kommunikationsquadrat

3. James 1:19–21, The Message, by Eugene H. Peterson.

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