

Why Communication Styles Matter

Style differences—be they clothing, art, or how we live our lives—are present everywhere. We can choose our style as a means of self-expression. Style helps define us as individuals and, at the same time, binds us together culturally.

Communication styles, however, are not so much a matter of choice; they are connected to our inherent nature. Although related to our culture and experience, the foundation of communication style is connected to the way we naturally think and organize information.

Do you think in pictures, images, or both? Do you think in words? How central are your feelings in the thinking process? How affected are you by tone of voice? These questions and others get to the heart of the communication styles framework.

So Why *Do* Communication Styles Matter?

How we think and organize information affects how we communicate. How we communicate affects our interactions with others—in other words, it has an enormous effect on all our relationships.

Does your spouse communicate in stories that frustrate you?

Does your child evade your questions?

Does your boss think out loud?

Do you understand the explanation from your medical practitioner?

Most of us can identify the all-too-common pitfalls and patterns of broken communication. The patterns become predictable and persist with maddening precision; the participants become disheartened and discouraged. Why even begin if it's going to be the same as always? Why indeed.

Today there is abundant information on improving listening and speaking skills. To have relational harmony, we know we're supposed to actively listen, reflect back to the other what we heard them say, discuss how we feel, and clarify what is important to each of us. Although this is a reasonable formula and a part of every communication toolbox promoted by mediators, counselors, educators, and helping consultants of every persuasion, it often is not enough. What is missing is the recognition of our inherent individual differences. Individual communication styles are as unique as fingerprints. Basically all fingerprints look similar, patterns of ridges and swirls. But on close inspection, they are shaped differently. The difference is in the details.

In the same way, we each speak differently. We all use our voice differently, giving words subtly different meanings. Our emotions color the context, and while our inner experiences are invisible, they are a powerful driver of how we communicate. How we listen is harder to describe because it relates to how our minds process information. The cognitive sciences are exploding with new information about how complex this process really is.

This book is not about brain science or communication differences between sexes; both have been widely written about. I've aimed this discussion toward helping individuals understand and work with the specifics of speaking and listening behaviors to achieve effective communication.

Developing the Framework

The question I asked over twenty-five years ago was this: How are learning styles reflected in interpersonal communication?

As a teacher, I was energized by the idea that children learn better if taught in the style best suited to their cognitive wiring. I was drawn to the simplicity of the visual-auditory-kinesthetic learning styles paradigm, which reflected a straightforward, commonsense approach to teaching and learning. Good teachers understand the importance of creating learning experiences that involve a multisensory approach. In other words, if you can involve children in seeing, hearing, and doing simultaneously, they are more likely to remember what they are being taught. Taking this a step further, children will learn better if teachers play to their individual strengths. For example, if a child has a strong capacity to learn through the visual channel, make sure he or she watches and/or reads about the new information; if a child learns best by doing, then make sure he or she can be physically involved in an

activity; and if the child has a primary auditory strength, make sure to read new material aloud or provide the information on recordings.

Later, as a psychotherapist, I became curious about how the learning styles paradigm could be applied in counseling. After all, counseling is a learning process—learning about one’s self, learning about relationships, and learning how to make changes in your life. Although the learning styles perspective is often associated with how we absorb information, it also relates to how we demonstrate knowledge or, rather, how we communicate.

I became increasingly aware of my clients’ visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strengths and began asking questions differently. For example, to ask what it is someone sees in a given situation and to describe it is very different than asking what he or she hears or feels. I came to understand more fully how some people need to directly experience something to know it and found role playing helpful to someone kinesthetically driven.

After working with this approach, which is not a theory of counseling but a communication tool, I discovered its practical value. It gave me a way to help people use their strengths to better express themselves and connect emotionally to their experience. And as I became more familiar with Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (see glossary), I considered how it might apply to interpersonal communication: how do speaking and listening behaviors relate to the various types of intelligences we possess? For example, if someone has abundant logical-mathematical intelligence (number smart) as well as interpersonal intelligence (people smart), how does this affect his or her interpersonal communication?

I began by trying to better understand myself. Where were my own communication strengths and weaknesses? How did I listen and express myself? I became increasingly sensitive to the nuances of my speech and listening behavior, my attentional stance, and my observation skills; and I began to witness these elements in my clients. Did they tend to use metaphors a lot? Did they quantify experience? Did they rely on interpersonal engagement? Was self-reflection a primary tool for understanding? Was tone of voice particularly important? Did they need to directly experience something to know it? Discovering the natural language of my clients seemed an important key to effective counseling.

As I refined my understanding and observation of the elements of learning styles and multiple intelligences, I saw them at play in relationships: interpersonal conflict was often driven by two clashing styles and possibly unrelated to the content of the conversation. For example, two people might really agree on the issue at hand, but one relied heavily on verbal language and was linguistically (word) sensitive, so became fixed on

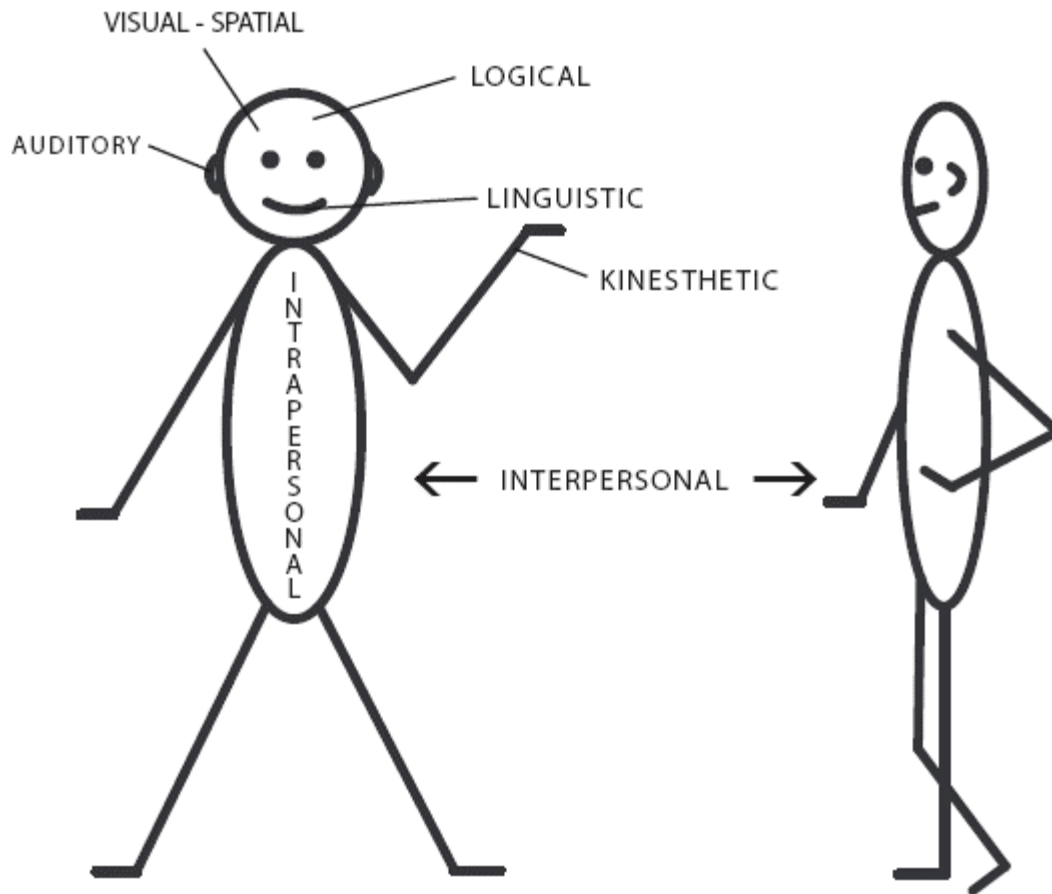
the precise meaning of words, while the other processed information primarily in the visual-spatial domain (picturing) and used words more impressionistically. Their “languages” were different, so they couldn’t fully understand one another. Accounting for stylistic differences in relationships provides natural validation for each individual and creates an opportunity for improved communication. Throughout the book, I give numerous examples to illustrate stylistic conflict, along with approaches for working effectively toward understanding.

The Communication Styles Framework

From working with the learning styles paradigm and the multiple intelligences framework, I discovered that when we communicate with others, seven components are at work:

- Linguistic (speaking)
- Logical (reasoning)
- Visual-spatial (picturing)
- Kinesthetic (experiencing/feeling)
- Auditory (listening)
- Interpersonal (relating to others)
- Intrapersonal (understanding self)

The interpersonal and intrapersonal components form the nucleus around which the others relate and answer the primary question, do you tend to think internally or externally? Certainly we do both, but usually we have a clear preference. (I describe the processes of thinking out loud versus thinking on the inside in the chapter that follows.)



When you converse, you exchange words with others (linguistic). You also visualize images and symbols (visual-spatial) and are aware of the sound, cadence, timbre, and rhythm of the other voices (auditory). You take in the posture, gestures, and facial expressions of the participants (kinesthetic) and the reasoned, commonsense flow of coherent information necessary for things to make sense (logical). Within a conversation too, you count on rapport, connectedness, and empathy for emotional connection (interpersonal) as well as your own ability to go inward and make sense of what you perceive based on prior experiences (intrapersonal).

The integration of these components forms the foundation of our communication style. How they synchronize depends on many factors outside of our awareness. Understanding how they function in processing information and driving self-expression can guide us to more successful interpersonal communication. Our sensitivity to these components allows us to overcome some of the serious roadblocks to effective interaction. Solving the communication style conflict in a relationship allows us to find the “real” issues involved and provides us practical tools for dealing with them.

The Structure of This Book

The next chapter in Part 1 is a discussion of the interpersonal and intrapersonal components, followed by chapters covering each of the others: linguistic, logical, visual-spatial, kinesthetic, and auditory. The discussion for each includes the following:

- A description
- Examples to highlight its strengths
- Problems arising from its strengths
- Tools to enhance its strengths

Part 2 is a workbook, a hands-on approach to help you understand how the communication components work for you. The workbook includes the following:

- Personal observation tools
- Communication components inventory
- Activities to help you identify and summarize your style

Three additional sections follow Part 2. In reverse order, these are a suggested reading list, a glossary, and an overview of essential interpersonal skills—“Basic and Necessary Communication Skills”—which is a natural companion to the communication styles perspective. In a succinct format, I’ve included a variety of communication tools that cover a range of needs. The topics are the following:

- Revisiting
- Giving feedback
- Clarifying meaning
- Validating
- Knowing what to say
- Repairing broken communication
- Opening up
- Problem solving

By understanding your relationship to each component, you will discover your personal communication style. In numerous workshops over many years, I’ve worked with parents, couples, management teams, mental-health professionals, and others using this format. Participants have become

more confident expressing themselves, more effective listeners, and more successful engaging in interpersonal problem solving. I will take you through a process similar to what I do in workshops to achieve this goal.

Working intentionally with inherent communication styles gives hope and practical tools for solving relational problems. Bringing this awareness into interpersonal relationships creates an environment that is naturally validating, respects individual differences, cuts down on assumptions, and encourages creative thinking. Effective communication is the bedrock of relational harmony.