

The Six Keys to Positive Communication



Communicating better can help you achieve your goals and deepen your relationships.

BY **JULIEN C. MIRIVEL** | APRIL 27, 2021

When I was 15 years old, I enrolled in a program to study English in what seemed like the middle of nowhere, also known as Iowa.



Having grown up in France and Switzerland, I spoke zero English. In Iowa, I couldn't understand what people were telling me, and I couldn't express myself. I couldn't connect with people, I couldn't create interactions, I couldn't build friendships. I faced some of the most difficult months of my life because I was in some ways mute, and in some ways deaf.

But that experience taught me the most beautiful aspect of human communication. As I learned to speak, as I learned to listen, as I learned to connect, I was able to create a social network around me. It was human communication that set me free.

Fast forward to today, and I have spent my whole career researching and sharing what I know about effective ethical communication. Some questions that have animated my work include: What communication behaviors exemplify our best potential as humans? What are some small actions that will help us interact more effectively? What communication behaviors have a butterfly effect?

Based on my research, I'll share six concrete behaviors that you can enact in your life today to improve your communication. At work or at home, these tips can help you start to inspire and influence the people around you. They can help you grow and change yourself, allowing you to deepen your relationships and create a better social world around you.

1. Greet to create human contact

In most people's minds, communication is a mode of transmission: You have an idea to send out, and once the message is sent, you have accomplished the goal of communication.

But communication is more than transmission; it's also creation. It creates experiences and builds relationships. If we take away communication, we take away relationship. In fact, I would propose that when you communicate, you are doing the work of relationship. You are *relating*.

The work of communication often starts with greeting, which is a simple but significant behavior: the moment when you initiate the process of making contact. One of the most disrespectful things a doctor can do when they meet with a patient is not greet them. When educators greet their students, it actually affects learning. And the best managers and leaders create opportunities for connection: They check on their employees and ask how they're doing. They're constantly in the process of building relationships.

As part of the New Zealand Language at Work project, researchers studied over 500 emails from two organizations: one company that was experiencing a lot of conflict, low morale, and turnover, and another with a very positive culture. After looking closely, the researchers noticed something striking: In the organization where people did not get along, the emails sounded like this:

The meeting is at 3:00 p.m.

That's it. But in the company where people were getting along, the emails sounded more like this:

Hi everybody,

Hope you are doing well. Looking forward to seeing you at our meeting on Friday at 3:00 p.m.

Have a great week.

Warmly,
John

The content is the same, but the little details that we add help us manage our connections with other people. Communication oils the social wheels; it is not just a mode of transmission.

To put this into practice, try initiating contact with three people that you do not know very well, but who are stakeholders in your organization; they can be anybody in the organizational hierarchy. Greet them. Ask them how they're doing; set up a Zoom call or a lunch; take a little bit of time to connect with them. If you practice this, then you'd be able to create deeper connections with people around you and expand your network of influence.

2. Ask to discover the unknown

When we ask questions, we are going on a quest. We are putting ourselves in a position to discover more, to learn from a position of humility and curiosity.

On a basic level, we can distinguish between closed-ended questions and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions—"Do you like blue or yellow?"—tend to narrow and control human interaction. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, tend to expand

and give people freedom to decide what to share and what not to share—like “Tell me about some of your favorite experiences in your life” or “What conversations have impacted you?”

One way of improving your communication is to learn to flip your questions from closed-ended to open-ended.

On annual reviews, for example, it's very tempting to say, “Did you have a good year?” But what if we flip the script and ask, “What can we do to help you reach your potential? What can we do this year to serve you and help you grow?” I learned this from an organization called Performance Group Management in Little Rock, Arkansas. With those questions, not only was the organization able to retain their employees, but they were able to find ways of helping them grow internally and build what has been widely celebrated as a very positive culture.

As another example, I do some research with Heifer International, which is trying to help create personal transformation in individuals around the world and help them end poverty in their own communities. Instead of asking, “Do you need help?,” they begin the process of change by asking people, “What are your dreams? What are your hopes?”

3. Compliment to affect people's sense of self

The single most important truth in the field of human communication is that what we say, what we do, affects people. It affects who they are, in the moment, and it affects who they become. I think a lot about this as the father of three young children.

Complimenting is just one behavior among many that illustrates our capacity for affecting people in a positive way.

Sometimes, when I do trainings, leaders ask me how many compliments they should give to get their staff to do what they want. But compliments should not be used in a robotic way. Instead, I am advocating for a way of being. Complimenting is the choice to affect who people are and who they become, their sense of self. In fact, research suggests that we underestimate how good compliments make people feel.

“What we say, what we do, affects people. It affects who they are, in the moment, and it affects who they become”

—Julien C. Mirivel, Ph.D.

What is the best compliment that you have ever received? What has someone said to you that has positively impacted you? In my research, we have found that often those moments come from leaders, managers, supervisors, or teachers. When people we look up to say something about us that resonates, we take it in; we integrate it.

To put this into practice and make your own mark, you can think of three people that you really value around you, and deliver a meaningful compliment to them about their strengths. Or you can send an email to your team and say, “I want to celebrate the work that you’ve done, the strength that you’ve shown, especially as we respond to a global pandemic.” Communicating positively is about being intentional. As a leader, a parent, a partner, or a friend, we can all choose to use our words to do a little good.

4. Disclose to deepen relationships

The second important truth about communication is that the connection and closeness we feel with others is not a state that we can hold on to; it’s something we do. And the way we go about enacting this sense of love and collegiality is by the act of disclosure: revealing how we think, how we feel, and who we are in an authentic way.

Not all disclosure has the same function, but it does have some common elements. First, the disclosure needs to be authentic. It has to reflect this congruency between what you feel on the inside, and what’s happening on the outside. It has to be communication that’s truthful, honest, and personal, that reflects what you think and what you value.

It has to have integrity, and, more importantly, it has to be human. The more your experience can reflect our common humanity, the more it’s likely to resonate with other people when it’s spoken.

Research by Robert Ulmer, who is an expert in crisis communication at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, suggests that when leaders practice open and honest disclosure, they're able to respond much more effectively to crises. In one case he studied, Malden Mills CEO Aaron Feuerstein immediately responded to a fire affecting several manufacturing buildings by communicating openly and publicly with his stakeholders: "We're going to continue to operate in Lawrence. . . . We had the opportunity to run to the south many years ago. We didn't do it then and we're not going to do it now." Being open and honest shows that we care about our stakeholders and want to learn from the crisis.

To put this into practice, think of somebody that you can text right now to share that you're grateful for them. Be open and be honest with them. You can just say, "I'm thinking of you, and I just wanted you to know that I'm grateful to have you in my life." Pay attention to the feelings and thoughts going on inside of you—*should I do it, should I not do it, how are they going to respond?* Despite all that, in this moment you can choose to express your gratitude. That's disclosure.

5. Encourage to give support

Human communication, I would argue, is just as tangible a way of giving as giving money. We use communication to give love. We use communication to give affection. And when we choose to encourage others, we are using communication to give people the social support they need to develop and succeed.

I believe that we can transform any ordinary moment into an extraordinary one by what we say and share with other people, no matter what our role is.



The Science of Happiness at Work

Here's an example from my own career. For many years, whenever my students struggled, I would always say, "Hey, why don't you just ride the wave a little?" Then, during one incredibly hard year of work, I got to my office and found an email from my wife. Inside was the message, "Ride the wave, baby," with a Photoshopped picture of me on a real surfer. I remember that moment to this day.

That is the power of encouragement. What we say and do can make an impact not only in that moment, but as a source of support for years to come.

6. Listen to transcend differences

Learning how to become a better listener is not a small feat, but experts agree that it's a common trait of good leaders. If you can choose to listen deeply, you can transcend the perceived differences that exist between you and other people.

You can learn to listen more deeply by maintaining a high degree of openness to other people's perspectives and viewpoints. It also requires withholding judgment of people and their actions. Psychologist Carl Rogers called this "unconditional positive regard": a way of looking at people with warmth, without any conditions. In order to listen deeply, you have to cultivate deep empathy, the ability to look at other people's perspectives not to see whether they're right or wrong, but to understand their vantage point.

Finally, you have to learn how to give somebody your full attention. Physically leaning in with your body will start the process of deeper listening. If you get really frustrated, take your hand, put it underneath the table, and open it slightly—a physical gesture of openness. Listening can be uncomfortable, but there is a lot to learn if we quiet everything going on inside of us and turn our attention to other people.

I believe that if you practice positive communication, it's going to help you grow as a professional and as a person, create high-quality relationships at work and at home, and lead more effectively. When you take these small actions, you're beginning a butterfly effect. You're starting to change the script on your interactions, which affects the relationships that you care about, the groups you work in, and the communities you belong to. And if we do this together, we will co-create a better society for ourselves and our children.

This essay is based on a talk that is part of the Positive Links Speaker Series by the University of Michigan's Center for Positive Organizations. The Center is dedicated to building a better world by pioneering the science of thriving organizations.

**CENTER FOR
POSITIVE
ORGANIZATIONS**

M | MICHIGAN ROSS

Get the science of a meaningful
workplace delivered to your inbox.

Email Address

Sign Up

About the Author



Julien C. Mirivel

Julien C. Mirivel, Ph.D., is professor of applied communication at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. His mission is to inspire people of all walks of life to communicate more positively at work and at home. To learn more, visit julienmirivel.com.