

Communication: **INVISIBLY SHAPING OUR WORLD**

Written by Annika Hall, Paula Nordhauzen,
Claudia Byram, Frances Carter



“Communication – the largest single factor determining what happens to a person in this world, and what kinds of relationships s/he makes with others.”

(Satir, V., 1988, The new peoplemaking, Mountain View, CA: Science and Behavior Books)



Communication is at the core of our existence as humans. We form relations – to ourselves and others – through communication. We discuss and make decisions based on communication, and we succeed or fail in problem-solving, conflict resolution, and developing close relationships, primarily depending on how we communicate. In all contexts – both private and professional – we constantly interact and communicate with others to make sense of things, work out solutions, make friends, raise families, and achieve our goals.

Despite its importance to human life, communication gets relatively little attention. Because it feels so natural to us, we communicate *thinking about neither the act of communication itself nor its consequences.*

How we communicate, however, has a significant impact on ourselves, the people around us, and what we can achieve. The challenge, however, as illustrated by the case vignette below, is that despite the best of intentions, we often fail in our communication efforts.



CASE: PROBLEM SOLVING AT WORK

David, Laura, and Mary are colleagues meeting for the fifth time to decide on a marketing campaign that they plan to present to the management team in a few weeks. So far, they have not been successful.

Mary: *"I still think we should go for only a few segments of the market. We cannot reach everyone with one campaign."*

David (frustrated, he "knew" Mary would say this, and he has repeatedly pointed out he simply disagrees): *"Yes, but as I have said many times, I think it's a pity to exclude large groups from knowing about our products."*

Laura (noticing her energy sinking tries to address both her colleagues' points): *"Yes, it would be best if we could reach everyone, but I can't see how we can do that."*

David: *"We would certainly earn much more money if we reached more customers."*

Mary: (shakes her head in disagreement) *"Sure, but it is simply impossible to reach the number of customers that you would like in just one campaign."*

David (in a dismissive tone): *"I still think we should try. I think..."*

Mary (interrupts with irritation) *"And I still think that wouldn't work. It would be a complete waste of money, and I won't be part of suggesting such a plan to our management team."*

Let's pause and see what is going on in the communication

Although the context and topic can differ from situation to situation, the outcome of the conversation is quite predictable. Frustration grows when neither of the colleagues' arguments is heard. Instead, opinions pile up on top of each other and, if noted at all, get dismissed with different versions of 'yes-but'. The result is locked positions where the likelihood of reaching an agreement seems very low. Fortunately, there are ways in which team members can influence the pattern in a more functional direction.

Now with a different way of talking

Laura (arriving at the meeting determined not to let the same pattern repeat itself): *"Based on the last meetings, we have different opinions about the scope of the campaign and its likely effects. One opinion is that we should only target a selected segment, as we cannot reach every potential customer with the same message. Another opinion is that we should include as many segments as possible in the campaign, assuming that would mean more significant sales. Do you agree that these are the two main arguments we have so far?"*

Sarah: "Yes."

David: "I agree."

Laura: *"I suggest that we now explore these arguments one at a time and gather additional facts before continuing our discussion. What do you say?"*

Mary (after being silent for a while): *"I agree with you, Laura; it seems like a good idea to start as you suggested." I could check if we have any data on the segments, or if we need to do that research from scratch."*

Laura: "Great! What do you think, David?"

David: "It's worth a try to see if that helps us move forward."



Why this works

By summarizing the situation and asking if others agree with her interpretation, Laura creates a window of opportunity for problem-solving. When she receives confirmation that her colleagues agree, she proceeds to propose a course of action: to examine each viewpoint individually and gather relevant facts. There are still differences in the room, but now colleagues have started creating a climate where they can discuss these differences more constructively. The likelihood of them reaching their goal of creating a marketing plan has increased.

IT'S NOT MAGIC - IT'S SAVI

How we communicate is crucial in a conflict situation. Specific ways of communicating are more likely to fuel conflicts, while others are more likely to calm them down. (Benjamin et al., 2012). To understand the difference and to know how to potentially influence a communication pattern in a desired direction, SAVI is a useful roadmap.

SAVI is an abbreviation for System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction. It is a research-based theory and a practical tool for analysing and influencing communication. Creators Yvonne Agazarian and Anita Simon based their work on prominent theorists, including Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Kurt Lewin, and Claude Shannon & Warren Weaver. Yvonne and Anita aimed to develop a system to objectively assess group functioning and link it to outcomes like productivity, morale, efficiency, and cohesion. They created a "map" in the form of a grid, which became the core SAVI tool.

The purpose of communication is information transfer

The SAVI grid (next page) is a helpful tool for understanding the difference between communication that obstructs giving and receiving information (tending to spark misunderstandings and conflict) and transferring information, enabling mutual understanding, closer relationships, and effective decision-making.

The SAVI grid consists of nine squares, each representing a specific set of verbal behaviors. Each square is situated in a specific row and column. The red row is called avoidance. It includes communication behaviors that introduce “Noise” in the communication. Noisy behaviors disrupt the clarity and flow of communication.

Noise increases our stress levels. If a noisy communication pattern continues, the felt stress makes us close our boundaries, i.e., we become less able to take in and process information. We also become less able to convey the information (opinions, facts, emotions, etc.) that we have in a way that is easy for others to understand. There is still information in the “red” verbal behaviors, but it is expressed in such a way that its meaning is hidden or unclear. Situations with noisy communication, high stress levels, and closed boundaries tend to lead to increased frustration or anger, resulting in a vicious cycle of red behaviors and conflict.

 SAVI® Grid System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction CLASSIC			
PERSON		TOPIC	
	Personal 	Factual 	Orienting 
Red A V O I D A N C E	1 FIGHTING Attack/Blame Righteous Question Sarcasm Self Attack/Defend Complaint	2 OBSCURING Mind-Reading Negative or Positive Prediction Gossip Joking Around Thinking Out Loud Social Ritual	3 COMPETING Yes-But Discount Leading Question Oughtitude Interrupt
Yellow C O N T I N G E N T	4 INDIVIDUALIZING Personal Information Current Personal Information Past Personal Opinion/Explanation Personal Question	5 FINDING FACTS Facts & Figures General Information Narrow Question Broad Question	6 INFLUENCING Opinion Proposal Command Social Reinforcement
Green A P P R O A C H	7 RESONATING Inner Feeling Feeling Question Answer Feeling Question Mirror Inner Experience Affectionate Joke Self Assertion	8 RESPONDING Answer Question Clarify Own Answer Paraphrase Summarize Corrective Feedback	9 INTEGRATING Agreement Positives Build on Other's Ideas or Experience Work Joke
Silence, Laughter, Noise			
Developed by Yvonne Agazarian and Anita Simon. Note: The SAVI® Grid is intended to be used in conjunction with SAVI® training. Taken out of context, the content of the Grid may be ambiguous, confusing or misleading. SAVI® is a registered trademark of SAVI® Communications LLC. Copyright © 2022 SAVI® Communications LLC			

Diagnosing what went wrong and finding strategies for influencing communication

Examining the case vignette in the context of SAVI helps us understand why the conversations became derailed. In the first version of the case, numerous red behaviors were used, including Yes-But, Interrupt, and Discount. And when the overall communication climate is already “red”, single “yellow” (neutral) communication behaviors, such as Opinions, tend to be used as fuel for the conflict.

SAVI, however, not only offers explanations for what went wrong in a communication situation, but it can also be used to find strategies for influencing communication in a more positive, productive way.

The green row of the SAVI matrix represents communication behaviors that have the potential to reduce stress levels and open boundaries. Mirroring (feelings), paraphrasing (content), summarizing, and asking questions are communication behaviors that we can turn to if we want others to feel heard and understood. This green row is called approach; by using these behaviors, we try to meet the person or persons we are talking to and build a safe communication climate that fosters relationships and teamwork.

In the case, Laura creates a window of opportunity for problem-solving by summarizing the situation and asking if others agree with her interpretation. When she receives confirmation that her colleagues agree, she proceeds to propose a course of action: to examine each viewpoint individually and gather relevant facts. As the overall communication climate is now “greener” (Summary, Narrow and Broad Question, Answer Question), the Proposal, which is a “yellow” communication behavior, and the following question are met by further “green” behaviors: Agreement.

**Communication pattern
first case dialogue**

1 Attack/Blame Righteous Question Sarcasm Self-Attack/Defend Complaint	2 Mind-Reading Negative or Positive Prediction Gossip Joking Around Thinking Out Loud Social Ritual	3 Yes-But Discount Leading Question Oughtitude Interrupt
4 Personal Information Current Personal Information Past Personal Opinion/Explanation Personal Question	5 Facts & Figures General Information Narrow Question Broad Question	6 Opinion Proposal Command Social Reinforcement
7 Inner Feeling Feeling Question Answer Feeling Question Mirror Inner Experience Affectionate Joke Self-Assertion	8 Answer Question Clarify Own Answer (with data) Paraphrase Summarize Corrective Feedback	9 Agreement Positives Build on Other's Ideas or Experience Work Joke

**Communication pattern
second case dialogue**

1 Attack/Blame Righteous Question Sarcasm Self-Attack/Defend Complaint	2 Mind-Reading Negative or Positive Prediction Gossip Joking Around Thinking Out Loud Social Ritual	3 Yes-But Discount Leading Question Oughtitude Interrupt
4 Personal Information Current Personal Information Past Personal Opinion/Explanation Personal Question	5 Facts & Figures General Information Narrow Question Broad Question	6 Opinion Proposal Command Social Reinforcement
7 Inner Feeling Feeling Question Answer Feeling Question Mirror Inner Experience Affectionate Joke Self-Assertion	8 Answer Question Clarify Own Answer (with data) Paraphrase Summarize Corrective Feedback	9 Agreement Positives Build on Other's Ideas or Experience Work Joke

TALK THAT WORKS: BUILD TRUST, GET RESULTS, HANDLE CONFLICT

The case vignette illustrates how practicing SAVI expands the possibilities for creating a communication climate where information can be truly heard. Instead of directing others on how to communicate, or “putting words in people’s mouths”, SAVI skills enable us to facilitate communication to help us understand each other. In doing so, SAVI helps create an open and safe environment that fosters open and effective exchange.

Conscious communication is needed to bridge differences and resolve emotionally laden conflicts. The key is *how* to communicate. In turn, this requires self-awareness—an ability to be aware of one’s reactions in the moment: What am I feeling? What do I need? Am I able to first listen to understand (not just to present my competing view), ensure I understand, and only *then* express my thoughts? In other words, am I able to consciously respond instead of reacting?

Communication awareness and improved communication skills enable us to choose how we influence the contexts in which we are a part. Through communication, we always influence our surroundings. How we communicate is not just about personal preferences for more personal or factual communication. It’s also about being able to adjust our communication behavior depending on the context, whether it’s work, family, debate, sales, romantic relationships, or other situations.

Moment to moment, the choice is ours

We cannot *not* influence; everything we say has an impact on our fellow human beings. The choice we can make is, thus, what *kind* of influence we want to have on others. We can constantly make a difference, for better or for worse.

SAVI is a helpful tool in making these choices, serving as a roadmap for achieving the communication outputs we strive for. It may require both hard work and determination, but ultimately, SAVI paves the way for conflict resolution, stronger relationships, and better decision-making.

Are you curious?

Take a look at
savicomcommunications.com
for more information and training



SAVI® WAS DEVELOPED BY YVONNE AGAZARIAN AND ANITA SIMON.

SAVI® IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF SAVI® COMMUNICATIONS LLC.