

## Achieving Satisfying Group Communication

Beneficial communication is often as much about process and approach as it is about content. Even when opinions differ or perspectives remain divided, participants in a conversation can still feel heard and valued.

However, one of the challenges is that each person will tend to have different preferences when it comes to what a satisfying communication process will look like. The types of opportunities to talk, the tone, structure, and direction of the conversation, can all influence the quality of experience for each individual.

Given that communication is a fundamental facet of relationship, and that relationships are at the core of excellent followership, this activity is one opportunity to uncover communication preferences, with the hope of being able to engage in conversations in such a way that all participants will find the experience—regardless of the specific outcome—to be a satisfying one that yields the best contributions from everyone.

This activity will be a suitable follow-up to Study 10 in the book [Embracing Followership: A Discussion Guide for Teams & Small Groups](#). It also accords well with Chapters 9, 10, & 15 of [Embracing Followership: How to Thrive in a Leader-Centric Culture](#).

**Step 1 > Reflection:** Begin by having each group member think through the list of items below. You might supply this list prior to coming together to talk through this activity, in order to give each member sufficient time to consider which items are important to them.

Which of the following items tend to make you feel more/most satisfied with a group conversation (circle the item numbers of all that apply)? In some cases, you may prefer the opposite of a listed item (e.g. instead of #14, you might prefer to leave things open-ended, with the opportunity to revisit the issue again later); note these items as well, by X'ing through the number.

1. Being able to frequently contribute during the discussion (lots of opportunities)
2. Being able to speak/share my thoughts at length during the discussion (long opportunities)
3. Feeling free to contribute (whether I choose to use that freedom or not)
4. When a majority of what's said by the group is positive, agreeable, affirming
5. When feedback is directed toward ideas & tasks, rather than toward people
6. When the discussion feels orderly, well-managed, without external interruption
7. When the conversation includes time for personal connection & non-business matters
8. When there is time to process internally/reflect/have silence during the conversation
9. When I feel like everyone participating is a peer/equal
10. When there are frequent opportunities to check for understanding and clarity
11. Ensuring that there is no interpersonal tension before a conversation starts
12. Ensuring that group harmony exists throughout the discussion
13. Ensuring that there is no interpersonal tension after a conversation concludes
14. When the conversation ends with closure, resolution, & clear action items
15. Something else (please explain)

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**Step 2 > Individual Preferences:** Next, bring the group together in order to learn about the individual communication preferences of group members. For a larger group (6 or more people), simply go down the 15-item list one at a time, and ask who selected the item as one of their important facets of satisfying communication. For smaller groups (5 or less), you might just ask one person at a time which items they selected. Either way, each group member (or at least the activity facilitator) should make notes along the way of who chose what (this will be useful in Step 3).

When someone identifies a particular item (or its opposite) as one of their important factors for a satisfying communication experience, a variety of follow-up questions can be asked, depending on amount of time available, how well group members already know one another, and desire for knowing and understanding one another at a deeper level. Answering some of these questions will help the group to implement satisfying communication practices (Step 4).

- i. How important is this particular item for you? Essential? Nice, but not strictly necessary?
- ii. How does it feel to you if this item is/isn't a facet of a conversation? How will its absence hinder your engagement in the conversation? How will its absence potentially impact the nature of your relationships with other group members?
- iii. What does fulfilling this preference look like for you? Have you been a part of other groups where this item was usually a part of their communication? How did that group ensure this item was regularly included in their conversations? What structures, expectations, commitments, ground rules, etc. were set in order to facilitate the presence of this item as part of the group's communication dynamic?

**Step 3 > Group Picture:** Having heard from individual group members, we next gather a sense of the group's overall preferences and dynamics, in order to facilitate implementing good habits in order to promote effective and satisfying communication.

Explore the following questions as a simple way of developing a group analysis. If time is limited, you might consider spreading the entire activity over two sessions: pausing after Step 2, entrusting a facilitator to work on Step 3, and then resuming at a later time/day to review the findings, and then to proceed to Step 4.

- i. Which item was the most selected? Was it chosen by about half the group, a significant majority, all but one group member (i.e. there's an 'odd man out'), or was it unanimous?
- ii. Which items were selected by only a single group member? Values or preferences held only by one individual can be easy to overlook if that member doesn't readily assert his/her preference, and may be hard for the group to prioritize if it feels it's not significant to enough people.
- iii. How many of the first 14 items were selected by at least one group member? A wide variety of preferences will take significant effort for a group to implement; it's not impossible (none of these preferences are mutually exclusive), but the group should be aware of (and committed to) the work necessary to create the optimal communication environment for all of its members.
- iv. Did anyone select item #15 (and describe their preference)? Did group members find these surprising, relevant, affirmed by other group members, taken for granted, ...?
- v. Which items were selected by the group leader and/or group members who are especially prominent, vocal, or influential? Such preferences, even if not held by a majority, may tend to set (or significantly impact) the group's default dynamic.

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**Step 4 > Implementation:** Reflection and analysis is only truly beneficial if it leads to impact on the group's behavior. Building on what was shared in the previous steps, it's time for the group to decide how it wants to interact and communicate in the future.

Motivation for implementation will vary depending on the group's concern for each member (the weight of individual preferences), expectation for how long they'll continue working together (is it worth making a significant investment for long-term benefit), and the perceived current degree of dissatisfaction (it's not that broken so why bother to fix it?).

For groups with low felt need for change or low concern for individual member satisfaction, beginning with the results of your analysis from Step 3.i above is often safest; the item that most people selected will likely have the most support. The challenge with starting here can be that each group member that selected this item may have a different opinion on how that preference should be implemented, what it looks like to have that item feel personally fulfilling and a part of the group's structure. This can create multifaceted debate that is difficult to settle.

For small groups, or where there has been obvious tension in the past, looking at the results of Step 3.ii or iv may be valuable items to focus on. Addressing hitherto unknown/ignored communication needs may do much to relieve subliminal tension and to open up trust and vulnerability for improving communication further.

If tension has existed primarily with the group leader or key influencers (items in Step 3.v), this may be an opportunity for the group to address the relevance of those preferences for the group as a whole, and/or to reexamine the way that those preferences have thus far flavored the group dynamic. Going back to the Step 3.i items, this can be an important occasion for dialogue if many people expressed the same preference, but the leader/influencer has set the pattern for fulfilling that preference, and other group members may still find themselves without the desired level of satisfaction since the value hasn't been met according to their own needs.

After you've determined which item(s) to discuss a few points of dialogue will be useful. Depending on the time invested in Step 2 follow-up questions, some of these points may have surfaced already.

- i. All of the items are somewhat subjective, often based on personal feelings (e.g. #3,6,8) or standards (e.g. #1,2,7). All group members that selected the item for discussion need to be asked what it looks like to them to have this preference met.
- ii. Ask whether preferences indicated need to be fulfilled in every meeting/conversation, or whether they only need to occur periodically, or are only important in some communication scenarios (such as when important business or certain topics are discussed).
- iii. Explore whether there is a way to meet all of the specific preferences for this item, or navigate a compromise amongst the interested parties.
- iv. Articulate how the group will implement this, confirming agreement/commitment to do so.

As an example, let's say two of the five people in our group selected item #3, wanting to feel free to contribute. For one person, an introvert, that means being specifically invited/asked to share his opinion. For the other, a possibilities thinker, it means being able to offer an idea or question as soon as it comes into her head, even if it means interrupting someone. So, the same item was selected, but there are different preferences for fulfillment. The group decides the second member can offer her ideas, but should do so as a question specifically addressed to the first member, in order to solicit his thoughts. Additionally, the group facilitator will be aware that if the first member hasn't contributed in a while, he will specifically ask him if there's anything on his mind. They decide that they'll include this dynamic every week during their regular group meeting, but not necessarily in urgent/emergency situations. Everyone agrees and anticipates effective, satisfying interaction!

\*This material based in part on the work of Egolf & Chester in *Forming Storming Norming Performing: Successful Communication in Groups and Teams* (iUniverse, 2013).