



**UNDER
CONSTRUCTION**



Communicating Problems

Agenda

- **Definitions**
- Psychology
- Tools for Communicating about Problems



How do we define a problem?

prob·lem

/'prɒbləm/ 

noun

1. a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome or harmful and needing to be dealt with and overcome.

"they have financial problems"

synonyms: difficulty, issue, trouble, worry, complication, difficult situation, mess, muddle, mix-up;

[More](#)

2. **PHYSICS · MATHEMATICS**

an inquiry starting from given conditions to investigate or demonstrate a fact, result, or law.

What are the common types of problems?

- Ability
 - “I can’t do that”
- Motivational
 - “I don’t want to do that”
- Interpersonal
 - “You can’t make me do that!”



How do we define a successful solution?

Solve the Problem



Maintain the Relationship

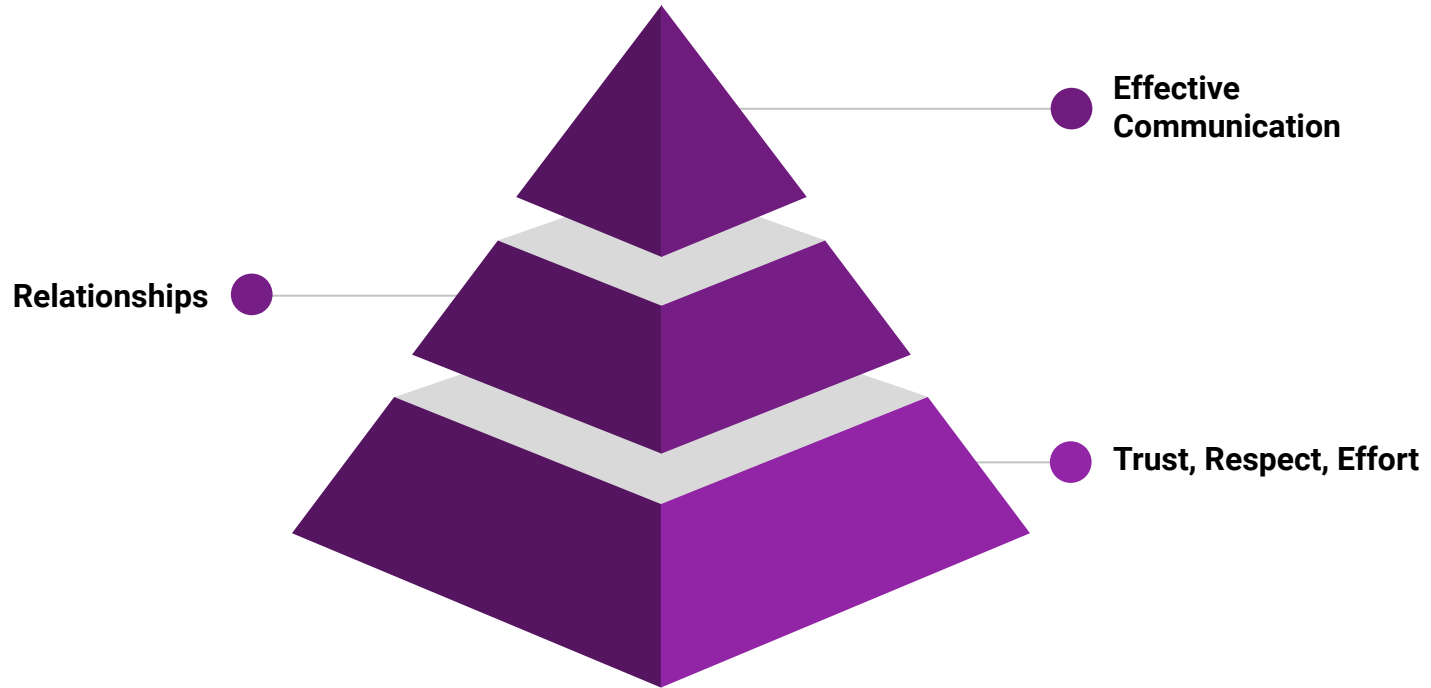


Agenda

- Definitions
- **Psychology**
- Tools for Communicating about Problems



So why is effective communication so hard?!



Communication Style is Important

We form unconscious opinions about people based on their communication styles

- Accent
- Culture
- Pitch of voice
- Speed and pacing
- Pausing to allow others to speak

We tend to like people with communication styles **similar to our own**

“Many of our motives, so obvious to us,
are never perceived by the people we talk to.
Many instances of rudeness, stubbornness,
inconsiderateness, or refusal to cooperate
are really caused by differences in
conversational style.”

~ Deborah Tannen

Storytime with Dirk

Undercut by my labmate

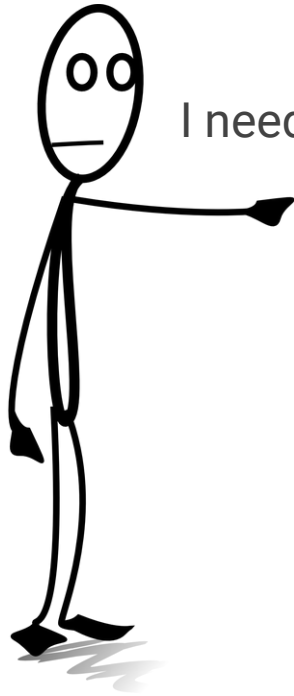


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- Definitions
- Psychology
- **Tools for Communicating about Problems**



Effective communication requires **shared context**



I need those results by Friday at noon!



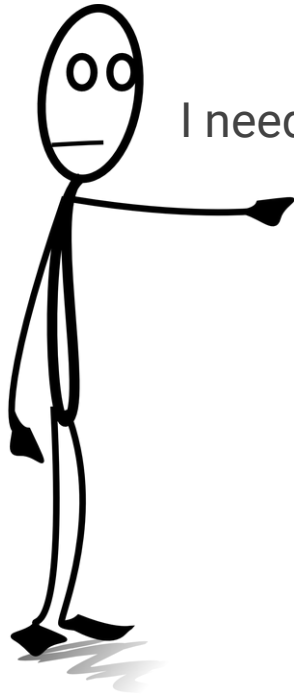
Results of what?

Ability problems

- “I can’t do this”
 - Lack of resources
 - Lack of knowledge
 - Lack of skills
 - Lack of experience
- Avoid misdiagnosis
 - Do not assume you understand the source of the problem
 - Ask for ideas
 - Listen carefully - is this truly an ability problem?
 - Work collaboratively to identify a solution

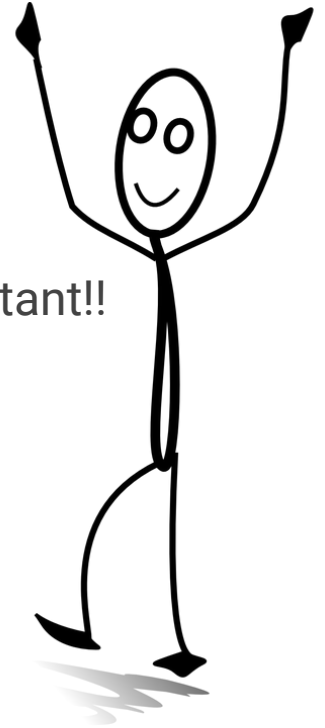


Effective communication requires **shared motivation**



I need those results by Friday at noon!

Of course! They're very important!!



Motivational problems

- “I don’t want to do this”
 - Inconvenient
 - Undesirable
 - Difficult
 - Boring
- Communicate consequences
 - Natural consequences (Impersonal -----> Personal)
 - Imposed consequences
 - Follow up



What are interpersonal problems?

Pat is too timid
Adrian makes me feel like a jerk
Chris is rude
Dakota talks too fast
Zoidberg is an Alien
Jamie always picks a fight with me

Why are interpersonal problems hard to resolve?

- Emotion can get high
- Arguments can get muddled
- Stories get confused with facts
- Fool's choice
 - A false dilemma between two (bad) options - "tell a lie or lose a friend"
 - In reality, there are several options, some of which are good



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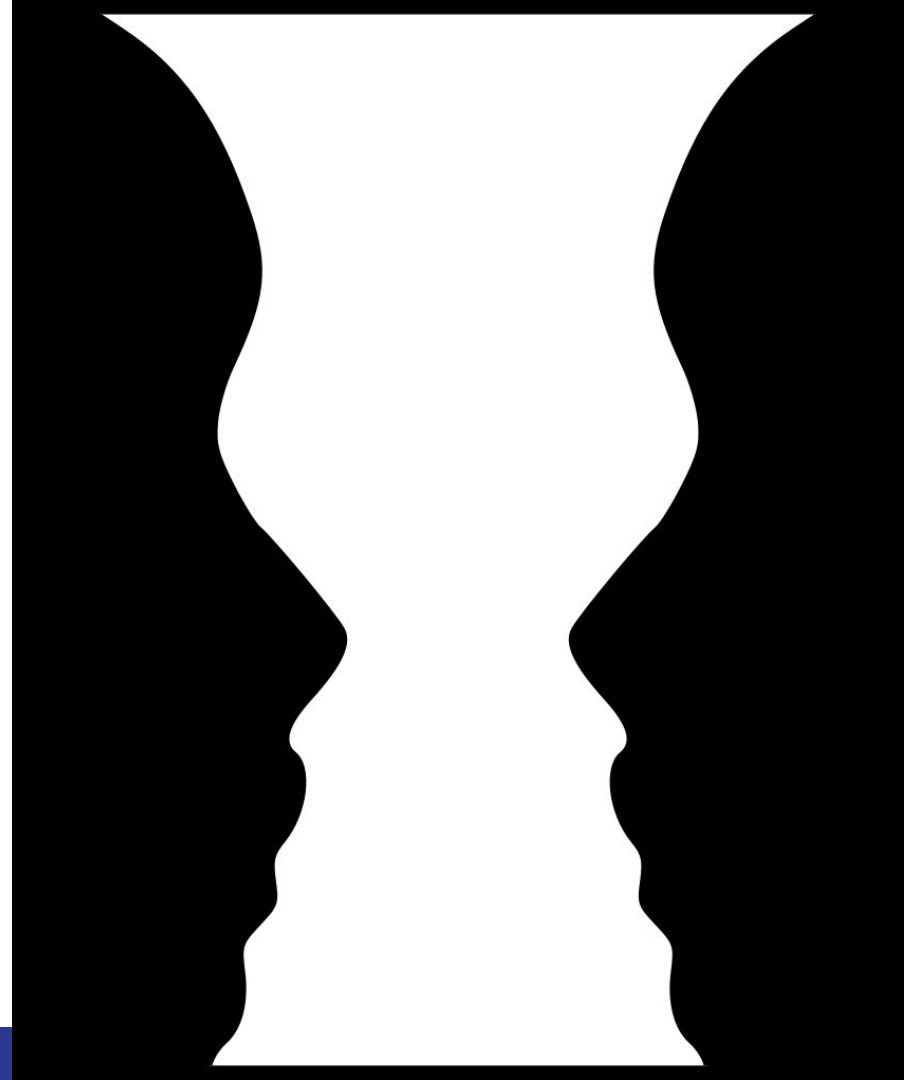
Storytime with Dirk

Fighting with my advisor



Mirroring Activity

- Form two lines and face each other
- Designate one line the leaders; the other line follows
- Mirror everything from the waist up
- Switch roles of lines
- Have one line rotate



Why is mirroring valuable?

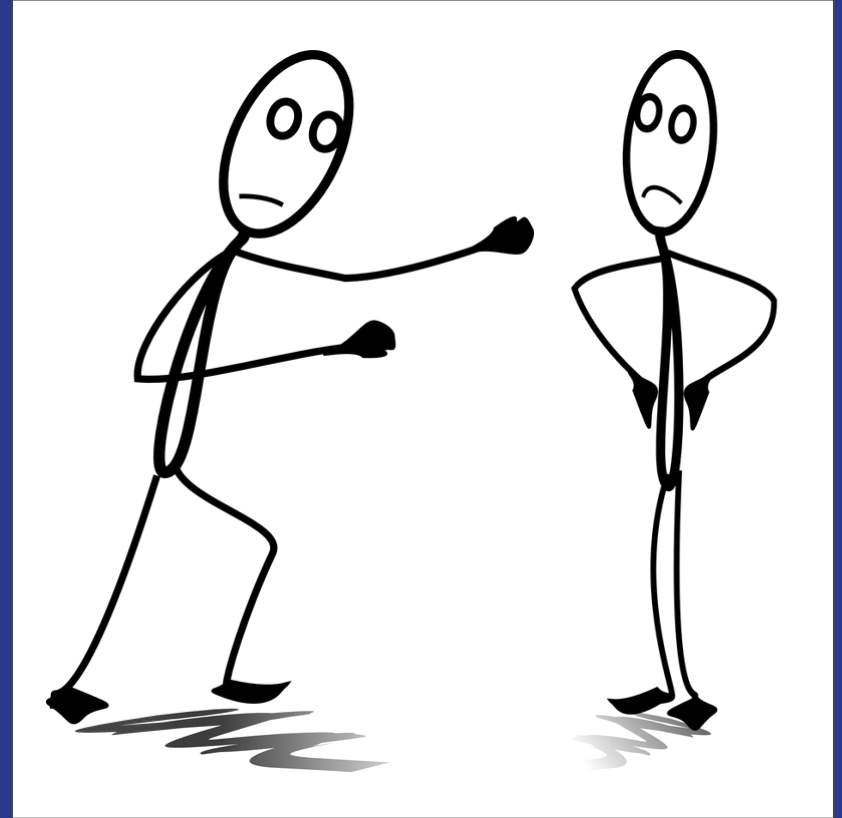
- An effort to match communication styles with your partner
- Body language mirroring can build trust and put people at ease
- Psychological impact: mirroring is an unconscious form of agreement



Back to psychology...

The Demand / Withdraw Dance

Burrell et al. (2014) "A Meta-Analysis of Demand/Withdraw Interaction Patterns" in *Managing Interpersonal Conflict: Advances Through Meta-Analysis*, Burrell et al. eds.



Sometimes you just have differences of opinion

- Diverse opinions are good
- Acknowledge others' points of view and motivations, even if they differ from yours
- Good leaders make it safe to voice an opinion

When you Disagree, remember your ABCs

Agree. Start by finding the points where you agree.

Build. Use these points of agreement as a foundation to build the relationship.

Compare. Work together to examine the areas of disagreement and compare both perspectives. You may not always find solutions, but you will gain understanding and build relationships.

An exercise...

A little more psychology...

In conversation, you tend to remember the last thing you hear

When you are feeling defensive, you tend to “fight back”

To communicate a problem effectively
start with **expectations** and end with **observations**



You've got mail!

- Use an expected vs. observed structure when communicating problems through email
- Excellent opportunity to practice (and revise)
- Don't fill in the "to" field until the very end!



Email Example - Student not behaving

Dear Blake,

Your jobs are going over resource limits and causing the nodes to go down. You need to stop running them immediately or we will disable your account.

- HPC Team



Email Example - Expectations

Dear Dr. Xio,

From now on please come to me with all questions and comments instead of the HPC staff. I realize that there is a problem on the system which is impacting your jobs but my staff is trying their best to fix the problem and your constant interruption are distracting them and making fixing the problem take longer.

- Rory



Email Example - Frustration

Dear Ali,

I am sick and tired of you interrupting me during meetings. My opinion is just as important as yours. Please stop.

- Rory



Email Example - Sandwiching

Dear Alexis,

I really like the energy you are bringing to the lab. However, I have noticed that you have stopped writing weekly reports. We really need them. You have also created a wonderful workspace. Keep up the good work.

- Sage



Email Example - Need help in class

Dear Dr. Horton,

I really like your class, however, I am having trouble understanding your accent. Would it be possible to go to Dr. Aderal's section instead

Thank you,

- Reese



Email Example - Student Mentee

Dear Harley,

You are not spending enough time in the lab and therefore not getting enough work done. I need you to either put in the time that is needed or you need to let me know so I can hire a different student to take your place.

- Dr. Slatemore





