



Communications Agreement



“Setting boundaries, good boundaries – the intention of that is to allow for communication to happen.”

–Pema Chödrön

This guide is a living document to support the Middle Way School community in healthy personal and organizational communications.

Two Fundamentals

Approach with Openness (*Shunyata*)

Nothing is as solid as it seems. Open and creative communication is supported when we realize that countless causes and conditions factor into every person’s experience, and therefore every relationship. There is never a single cause of conflict. Challenges viewed through this lens become more workable and less rigid. It helps to remember we are all stardust. (Shunyata is a Sanskrit term loosely translated as: all things are empty of a truly existing essence.)

See the Good (*Bodhicitta*)

Recognizing that basic goodness is inherent in all beings helps to diffuse the tension of dualism. It is reasonable to assume that all people have good intentions and good hearts. Most conflict or dischord stems from some form of miscommunication of this intention.

Basic Principles¹

Start with Yourself

- **Self-reflection** is the foundation for good communication.
- **Celebrate mistakes** as opportunities for learning.
- **Consider your motivation.** Why are you needing to communicate?
- **Consider your timing.** Is it essential to communicate at this moment, or would it be better to wait for emotions to temper and thoughts to be composed?
- **Watch your mind.** Take a bird’s-eye view to see your place in what is arising.
- **Relax your voice;** speak from the diaphragm.
- **Monitor for adrenaline.** If you sense tension arising, drop it; try not to speak from it. If you cannot deescalate, have an agreement within the group that a time out can be called. “I don’t know if this is a good time, I may need a time out.”

¹ Many of these principles come from Amina Knowlan, designer of the Matrix Leadership program. <https://matrixleadership.org/about>

Practice Mindful Listening

- In Buddhism there is a classic structure of The Three Defects of Listening represented by three pots: an overturned pot simply doesn't listen, a pot with holes in it doesn't retain what is being said, and a pot with poison in it has preconceived notions that taint what is being said. **Try to be a clean, sturdy upturned pot.**
- **Pay attention** to the intent and purpose of others.
- **Risk-free communication is essential for open dialogue.** It's helpful to remember that some people process by speaking aloud before thinking. Allow words that are not thought through to be said without immediate judgment.
- To the extent possible, **suspend judgment** in order to truly and actively listen.
- **Respect** that whatever a person is saying makes sense and is valid to them.

Build Community

- Establish friendliness as the default. **Warmth enlivens healthy organizations.**
- Recognize that people have unique and individual ways of expressing tenderness. Find your personal style of offering. (*see enneagram reference*)
- **Have fun together.** Making time for enjoyable activities helps establish a ground for challenges that may arise.
- **Talk with everyone.** Cultivate strong individual relationships so each member of the group has a connection and direct communication with each other person.
- **Celebrate cultural diversity.** Be gentle when you don't understand others' way of being.
- **Develop systems for receiving and offering support;** conflict is often a result of undelivered feedback.
- Look for opportunities to **offer praise** as much or more than you share criticism.

Conflict and Challenge

- **Don't fear conflict.** Dynamic tension fuels creativity and organizational growth.
- Remember **there is a choice.** Use conflict as an opportunity to connect to a greater vision. Instead of getting sucked into emotionally loaded story lines, choose to keep a larger perspective.
- **Be precise** about the details of the conflict.
- **"Do not wait in ambush"** is a classic Tibetan adage, meaning: don't cling to a problem until it bursts.
- Address things in a timely manner with love and compassion. **Not too hot and not too cold.**

Other Best Practices

- **Respect confidentiality**
- **Establish channels of support** in order to maintain communication in times of stress.
- Maintain awareness of the limitations of **electronic communication**, following these guidelines:
 1. Apply these same intentions to electronic correspondences.
 2. Pay particular attention to tone in order to maintain good communication.
 3. Pay attention to subject headings that support organization on the receiver's end.
 4. Pay attention to who is being copied and avoid unnecessary distribution.

Resources: A Collection in Progress

Following are a number of resources to support communication at Middle Way Schools and in the Middle Way Education Community:

“Don’t stir up extra dust and don’t sweep anything under the rug.”

—Elizabeth Namgyel

“It is very important for us to realize that humility, gentleness, and genuineness are absolutely necessary if we are interested in working with others. And if we are not, then we are not actually practicing dharma, the Buddhist teachings, at all.”

—Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Dharma Resources

- [Pema Chödrön on Barriers vs. Boundaries](#) – short blog post
- [The Art of Communicating](#) – book by Thich Nhat Hanh

Psychology/Neuroscience Resources

- [Uri Hasson: This is your brain on communication](#) – TED Talk
- [Brené Brown: The power of vulnerability](#) – TED Talk

Systems of Communication

- [Disagreement as Practice](#) – article by MWE Advisor Anja Hartmann
- [Creating a High Feedback Culture](#) – Amina Knowlan
- [How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation](#) – book by Robert Kegan
- [Giving and Receiving Feedback](#) – article by Larry Porter

Conflict Resolution

- [Matrix Radically Redefines Conflict](#) – article by Amina Knowlan
- [The Center for Nonviolent Communication](#) – an organization with a mission to support communication

Personalities in Community

- [16 Personalities](#) – a worksheet to determine your style of communication
- [The Enneagram Institute](#) – an organization dedicated to understanding one another

Best Practices

- [Guide to Best Practices in Nonprofit Communications](#) – PDF