

Communication Above or Below the Line

As issues arise for leaders, they're faced with choices about how to communicate about those issues. The context from which they communicate may influence everything that follows. When issues arise, do you communicate from Above the Line or Below the Line?

If you are Above the Line, you are "speaking unarguably." Speaking unarguably means you are tuning into what's happening internally and expressing that in ways that are true and accurate. This kind of authentic communication informs the other person about your experience, while paving the way for connection.

ABOVE THE LINE

Speaking Unarguably

— THE LINE —

BELOW THE LINE

Blaming and Complaining

Speaking Arguably

Gossiping

The Building Blocks for Speaking Unarguably

So much of what we think of as “communication” is really communication from the Drama Triangle and is tangled up with blame and stories and speaking about things outside of our experience (e.g. assumptions about other people). Above the Line communication is about speaking about and from our own experience, using language that is practical yet unarguable.

Below you’ll find six building blocks outlined with examples in the right column.

Share facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I watched the video surveillance tape from the break room and noticed you took my sandwich from the fridge and ate it. • I learned on Twitter that I didn’t get the job.
Share your feelings (I feel _____ (angry, sad, scared))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel angry. • I felt sad.
Share your story or assumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a story you are very inconsiderate and don’t think about other people. • I made up a story your company doesn’t care about people, since you didn’t give me the courtesy of calling me to let me know I didn’t get the job.
Turn your complaint into a request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My request is that you buy me two sandwiches, one to replace the one you ate and one extra for good measure. • Would you be willing to call those who go through the interview process and aren’t chosen to let them know they didn’t get the job?
Take healthy responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My part in this is I have watched other people take food that belongs to others and have not said anything. • I take responsibility for not clarifying your process for letting me know if I got the job.
Share your own experience while avoiding blame and gossip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m having the thought I don’t trust you. • I notice I’ve been feeling some sadness and anger since reading the Twitter post and I realize I’ve withdrawn from you.
Other examples of sharing your own experience while avoiding blame and gossip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I notice I’ve stopped listening. • I know I said I would attend the gathering but I’ve changed my mind and won’t be attending. • When you raise your voice in the meetings, I notice my heart races and I feel scared and shut down.

Examples of Speaking Arguably vs. Unarguably

THE SCENARIO:

A team member quit their job without telling their close colleague. Notice the two ways the colleague can respond, speaking arguably or unarguably.

ARGUABLE SPEAKING	UNARGUABLE SPEAKING
<p>"I heard you quit and it's because you weren't promoted."</p> <p>(Facts + stories)</p>	<p>"I received word today that you quit."</p> <p>(Facts)</p>
<p>"This makes me disappointed because I thought you would talk to me first."</p> <p>(Share feelings + explanation)</p>	<p>"I feel sad."</p> <p>(Share feelings)</p>
<p>"I know you, and I know you were too scared to tell me."</p> <p>(Tell your story as if a fact)</p>	<p>"I make up a story you were scared to tell me."</p> <p>(Name your story)</p>
<p>"You're going to get involved in your new job and you'll never talk about what really happened here."</p> <p>(Complain)</p>	<p>"Would you be willing to have coffee with me to discuss your decision?"</p> <p>(Turn complaint into request)</p>
<p>"You wanted me to promote you but you didn't give me enough time. I was really busy the last few months."</p> <p>(Blame + avoid responsibility)</p>	<p>"I bear responsibility in your decision to leave the organization. I didn't promote you when roles became available that you wanted."</p> <p>(Claim your part)</p>
<p>(Spoken to a colleague) "He wanted to be promoted but wasn't ready and he's going to struggle in his new position."</p> <p>(Gossip)</p>	<p>"I have the thought you wanted to be promoted but I don't think you were ready."</p> <p>(Share your experience without blame or gossip)</p>

An Exercise: Speaking Unarguably

1. Think of an issue where you know you went Below the Line. Write a summary of the issue from that perspective and give yourself permission to blame, complain, gossip, and speak arguably.
2. Review the building blocks below and choose three rows to focus on. For each row, write a corresponding sentence or two that relates to your issue. Review the examples on pages two and three for inspiration.

Share facts	
Share your feelings (I feel _____ (angry, sad, scared))	
Share your story or assumption	
Turn your complaint into a request	
Take healthy responsibility	
Share your own experience while avoiding blame and gossip	

3. Re-write your chosen statement(s) below as if you are speaking directly to the person involved in the issue.