

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?

ABOVE THE LINE

Speak Unarguably

Use candor

Reveal

— THE LINE —

BELOW THE LINE

Blame and complain

Gossip

Withhold → Withdraw →
Make up Stories

The Building Blocks for Speaking Unarguably, Expressing with Candor, and Revealing

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 functional yet unarguable.

<p>Share facts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I notice_____ (name the behavior, described as a fact) • I notice you left the pizza on the counter overnight • I learned on Twitter that I didn't get the job
<p>Share your feelings (Stick with core feelings and refrain from “adding on” to the feeling, e.g. rationalizing, defending, intellectualizing)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel/felt sad • I feel/felt angry • I feel/felt scared
<p>Share your story or assumption</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I assume you got busy and tired and forgot to put the pizza away • I made up a story your HR team is not organized around hirings • I make up a story you're considering quitting
<p>Turn your complaint into a request</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you be willing to call me personally and let me know if I don't get the job? • Would you be willing to not interrupt me when I'm presenting? • My request is that you would talk to me first if you are considering quitting
<p>Take healthy responsibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I did leave the pizza out all night • I didn't keep my agreement to not interrupt you. I commit to letting you speak without interruption • I bear responsibility in your decision to leave the organization. I didn't promote you when roles became available that you wanted
<p>Share your own experience while avoiding blame and gossip</p>	<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 • I notice I've been feeling angry since our last discussion and I realize I've withdrawn from you • I'm having the thought I don't trust you • When you raise your voice in the meetings, I notice my heart races and I feel scared and shut down

An Exercise: Communicating From Above the Line

The purpose of this exercise is to help you speak with candor from Above the Line, including revealing vs. withholding.

1. Think of an issue that involves another person where you know you went Below The Line. Which of the following did you do:
 - Blame or complain
 - Gossip about the person
 - Withhold → Withhold → Make up stories
2. Write a summary of the issue. Include blaming, complaining, stories if that's what's coming up.
3. 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 page two for inspiration.

Share facts	
Share your feelings (Stick with core feelings and refrain from "adding on" to the feeling (e.g. rationalizing, defending, intellectualizing))	
Share your story or assumption	
Turn your complaint into a request	
Take healthy responsibility	
Share your own experience while avoiding blame and gossip	

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