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Communication Climate at Work

Fostering Friendly Friction in Organisations

Øyvind Kvalnes

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PART I



Communication Climate

Abstract Every organisation or group has a communication climate. It manifests in the way members talk to each other in work settings. This chapter positions the concept in relation to those of voice climate and psychological safety and defines it in a way that is wider than both in that it encompasses the climate for voicing concerns and critical issues as well as the climate for expressing support, praise, and appreciation. The chapter also introduces the structure of the book, which has 15 chapters organised in three parts. Part 1 (Chaps. 1–6) addresses why the communication climate is important in organisations. Part 2 (Chaps. 7–11) presents five qualities found in well-functioning communication climates. Part 3 (Chaps. 12–14) highlights communication ethics. The book ends with a chapter containing suggestions for further academic work on the topic.

Keywords Communication climate • Psychological safety • Voice climate • Communication ethics • The silence mystery

The junior doctor Ida receives a message on her calling device. She runs to the nearest nurse at the hospital ward and urgently asks, “Where is this room?” The display shows a range of letters and numbers that makes no sense to Ida. With the nurse’s help, she eventually locates the room, where they find a pale and lifeless patient. They begin lung–heart compression,

but to no avail. The patient is dead and has been so for a while. It appears that he had been left alone and without supervision for a long time.

Ida struggles to make sense of this death. Her supervisor at the hospital encourages her to write a memo about her experience. In it, she describes the events as they unfolded and points out weaknesses in the routines when the responsibility for a patient is transferred from one unit to another. She outlines concrete measures that can improve collaboration between the surgical unit and the medical unit. Messages that have previously been handed over orally need to be put in writing. The coding of rooms for the calling system should be simplified and made more easily understandable. The transition period when patients move from one unit to another should receive additional careful attention.

What now? Ida does not know what to do with her memo. Would anyone be interested in reading her observations and recommendations? Her supervisor encourages her to approach the leader of the medical unit and present her findings. She does so and receives an invitation to present them at a meeting for all the doctors and nurses at the unit. Hesitantly, she says yes. Ida is nervous when the time comes to address this group of people who overall are much more experienced than she is. How will they receive critical input from a junior such as her?

The nervousness evaporates when Ida notices that the audience listens attentively to what she has to say. Her senior colleagues ask her to elaborate and be more specific. An experienced nurse enthusiastically thanks her for the initiative and says, “We have learned a lot from what you have told us now.” The leader of the unit is also supportive and praises her for the effort she has put into the memo and the presentation. From the outset, Ida formulated her reflections as an exercise in personal sensemaking. How was it possible that a patient was left to die alone in a modern and sophisticated hospital, surrounded by top health professionals? Her findings then turned out to be crucial input to improving the communication and collaboration between the surgical and the medical unit at the hospital. Attentive professionals listened to what Ida had to say and used her input as a foundation for strengthening their work routines.

Communication climate in organisations and groups is the topic of this book. I have approached workplaces with a curiosity to learn about their patterns and norms for speaking to each other. Before she spoke up, the junior doctor Ida was uncertain about the quality of the communication climate in the hospital unit where she worked. It turned out that senior leaders and employees welcomed her initiative and were receptive to the

message she had to tell them. They appreciated her engagement. Their responses indicate a healthy and open communication climate, one that can foster collaboration, learning, and human flourishing.

The book is a contribution to applied philosophy. My academic background is in philosophy, where I was trained to do conceptual analysis and inquiry. Since 2009, I have worked as a researcher and teacher at a business school, in a department of leadership and organisational behaviour. As a member of this work environment, I have had the opportunity to apply philosophical concepts to understand the workings of organisations, raising questions about how to lead a good working life and stimulate human flourishing in the workplace. Collaboration with colleagues who are not philosophers has taught me to appreciate the way philosophical reflection can feed on empirical research. I have realised that reflections on philosophical questions about the good life and human excellence can gain strength from studies in other academic disciplines. The current book is an attempt to conduct empirically informed applied philosophy. It has a practical orientation, and it is driven by a desire to make a difference in the way people communicate and collaborate in the workplace. I share with other researchers of human agency and motivation a sense of urgency to understand more about what constitutes human excellence, to make us able to address the monumental challenges that humanity is currently facing. Destructive political, social, and environmental developments point to a need for people to mobilise their capabilities to cope with complexity and work well together.

A communication climate manifests in the way leaders and employees in groups and organisations talk to each other in work settings. How do they praise and criticize each other? What are the patterns for sharing knowledge? How high is the threshold for speaking up and expressing disagreement and dissent? How easy is it to ask for help and admit limitations in one's understanding of tasks? To what extent and in what ways do they celebrate achievements and breakthroughs? I have used some of these questions to explore the communication climate in a group or organisation. The book builds on my Norwegian book on the same topic (Kvalnes 2022) and my previous research on fallibility (Kvalnes 2017). It also draws on and contributes to research on voice climate (Detert and Edmondson 2011; Morrison et al. 2011; Frazier and Bowler 2015), psychological safety (Edmondson 1999, 2018), and ways to foster constructive conversations at work (Edmondson and Besieux 2021).

I have gathered input for the book through a range of channels. Communication climate has been a topic in my teaching and supervision of executive students for several years. In the classroom, these students have shared experiences and narratives about communication climate challenges in their organisations. In their thesis work, they have explored specific aspects of the way people communicate in their organisations. They have made small-scale experiments to test how concrete changes in ways of communicating can influence motivation and collaboration. Supervising their theses has provided me with a variety of insights into the practical challenges associated with communication in organisations. I have also facilitated workshops and seminars in workplaces regarding ways to establish and maintain a constructive communication climate. These processes have provided crucial input to my theorising. Since 2021, I have hosted a podcast devoted to communication climate, where I have invited researchers and practitioners to talk about their findings and experiences. Several of the examples in the book are from podcast guests, including the opening story from Ida, the junior doctor.

Communication climate is a broader concept than voice climate, which is used in research to study shared perceptions among group members of the extent to which they are encouraged to engage in voice behaviour (Frazier and Bowler 2015); that is, presenting “innovative suggestions for change and recommending modifications to standard procedures even when others disagree” (Van Dyne and LePine 1998). Some of the narratives in the book also fit under the heading of voice climate, such as seen in the opening example involving Ida. Other examples go beyond that construct by illustrating and highlighting the ways members of a group can encourage, energise, and support each other; ask for and offer help; share experiences of having made mistakes; and so on.

Psychological safety is a concept that describes the perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risk in a work context (Edmondson 1999, 2018; Edmondson and Lei 2014). The level of psychological safety helps to explain decisions about offering help, sharing doubts, making suggestions for improvements, and being open or closed about mistakes. When contemplating such initiatives, the decision-maker might consider the likelihood that they will lead to personal repercussions and sanctions, and so be concerned about the level of psychological safety in the work environment.

Voice climate is a narrower concept than psychological safety (Frazier and Bowler 2015). Both are concerned with shared perceptions of the risk involved in taking an initiative at work, but the latter takes a broader view

in that it includes risk in asking colleagues for help, sharing doubt, and being open about mistakes. However, voice behaviour and voice climate only address the risk involved in making suggestions for improvements even when others may disagree.

Communication climate is an even broader concept than psychological safety because it involves more than just decisions featuring risk assessments. Many decisions on whether to express one's views or remain silent are unaffected by risk. People decide to become involved or not for a range of other reasons than the likelihood that it might be harmful to them. I will take psychological safety to be one of several qualities that can characterise a communication climate.

The communication climate in an organisation affects how colleagues give each other praise and support as well as the ways they provide criticism and dissent towards the other. Manifestations of communication climate can be seen in the ways colleagues share knowledge or keep it to themselves. The communication climate influences the threshold for suggesting improvements to current practices, speaking up about perceived wrongdoings, and expressing disagreement with colleagues or leaders. During work processes, the communication climate affects how easy or difficult it is to seek help from colleagues, admit mistakes, express uncertainty, and voice disagreement. Perceptions of the quality of the communication climate in a particular group or organisation can vary significantly. A leader may consider the quality excellent, whereas the people working in the leader's unit may think otherwise. The threshold for walking into the leader's office with bad news or critical concerns about an ongoing project can look higher from outside the office than it does from the inside.

The communication climate in an organisation affects the long-term patterns in the way leaders and employees typically address each other at work, as well as the ways in which they tend to provide support and encouragement or criticism and friction. When we obtain a glimpse of the activities that go on in an organisation on a particular day and witness one specific exchange of words between colleagues, it is tempting to draw conclusions about the communication climate. However, we have only witnessed the communication weather in that one situation. One exchange may not be typical of how people speak to each other in the organisation. Take the example of Ida and her courageous presentation of weaknesses in the collaboration between the medical unit and the surgical unit. Her colleagues listened attentively to what she had to say and expressed gratitude for her effort. It is all very positive, but all we can conclude from this

isolated event is that the communication weather was good on this occasion. Conclusions about the communication climate will depend on more observation and the extent to which recurring patterns and routines are in place for encouraging and listening to critical voices.

The examples in this book are mostly of well-functioning practices where people speak up at work and provide constructive praise or criticism, and their efforts are well received. My approach takes inspiration from the research tradition of positive organisational scholarship, where researchers deliberately explore practices that strengthen human capabilities and cultivate extraordinary human performances on individual, group, and organisational levels (Cameron and Dutton 2003). It also builds on assumptions embedded in the tradition of appreciative inquiry, the value of studying and learning from the best practices in organisations (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987).

At the core of my interest in communication climate lies a fascination with what we can call the *silence mystery*. It is similar to what Edmondson (2018) has called an *epidemic of silence*. Why do people keep silent when they can speak up and create a positive change in the situation in front of them? For example, they can use their voice to stop the continuation of a negative set of events, as in Ida's case, or their intervention can bring attention to promising alternatives or highlight a positive set of events. The initiative can be to express praise and acknowledgement of others' achievements. It is an opportunity to energise one or more individuals by praising their efforts. People can be positioned to make suggestions for significant improvements and do considerable good, but choose to keep saying nothing. Why?

A range of personal and systemic explanations underlies the silence mystery. The silence is particularly mysterious in cases where it seems that it is quite safe to speak up because the personal risk is low. The following are among the reasons I have heard people provide for their silence:

- He has too much to worry about already. I do not want to add to his troubles.
- I have done it before, and she does not really listen to what I have to say.
- He seems to be very keen on this solution, and not open to alternatives at this moment.
- It will just be too embarrassing.
- The others here are much more experienced than I am. I have probably misunderstood the situation. Even if I have not, they can give a more capable response.

- Other people here are more knowledgeable, and they are silent, so everything is probable fine.
- The communication climate here is excellent, so if there had been a reason to address this issue, someone else would have done it a long time ago.
- She gets so sarcastic when people disagree with her, and the conversation will turn unpleasant.
- On the previous occasion, he did not say thank you.
- If I speak up now, I will be handed the responsibility for fixing things, and I already have too much to do.
- It is my idea. If I share it with colleagues, one or more of them are likely to claim it for themselves.

The variety in the reasons people provide for remaining silent even when they have something important to say is striking.

Another set of explanations of the silence mystery points to systemic challenges that can occur in dyadic relations, as outlined by Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2006) and Sasaki et al. (2015). Each person in the dyad may hold back due to assumptions about the other person's willingness to engage. Both may mistakenly think, "This person is probably not interested in my views on the matter, so I will remain silent."

Both are interested in and would benefit from breaking the silence but are trapped in a system of mistrust and inactivity. Here, we have a system of holding back that the individuals can become aware of and challenge. As with other silence mysteries, an unhealthy deadlock is in place, a misunderstanding waiting to be exposed and overcome. Systems of holding back can be fixed or fluid (Kvalnes 2017), depending on the histories of the relations between the people involved. A fixed system is one that has existed unquestioned for a long time. The habits and routines for communicating have hardened through repetition. A fluid system is normally younger and easier to challenge and overthrow.

Breaking the silence is not always the optimal way forward. As Edmondson and Smith (2006) noted, silence can be a better option than speaking without self-discipline and talking past each other. It is in line with the reflections in this book that the alternatives of speaking up and remaining silent both can have positive and negative effects, as Edmondson and Besieux (2021) outlined in their productive conversation matrix.

This book is organised into three parts. Part I (Chaps. 1–6) addresses why communication climate is important in organisations. In work

settings, we can encounter what I will call *critical quality moments*, situations where the communication climate is put to the test. Will anyone speak up in the meeting and point out the weakness in the proposed plan for the way forward? Will anyone take an initiative to acknowledge the efforts from the team who just presented their excellent solution to a difficult challenge? In a critical quality moment, the next event to happen determines the quality of the work to follow. The setting may be one where the possibility for constructive communication agency exists for only a few seconds. The meeting is ending, and people are about to rise to leave the room. Now is the time to speak. In a few seconds, it will be too late. When many people are present and are in a position to take an initiative, bystander effects and group thinking may cause passivity. Another cause for concern is the phenomenon of inattentional blindness. People tend to see and notice only the aspects of a situation to which they are attending and be blind to other aspects. These situations call for intervention from those who sense that colleagues have blind spot issues. It can be helpful to identify possible critical quality moments in a group or organisation in advance and identify strategies and scripts for coping with them.

Part 2 (Chaps. 7–11) identifies five aspects of communication climate at its best: (a) Ideas and suggestions are exposed to *friendly friction*, well-meaning attempts to strengthen them through exposure to criticism. (b) An optimal communication climate has a *tolerance for false alarms*, a concept connected to a distinction between active speech mistakes (saying something that turns out to be mistaken or wrong) and passive speech mistakes (not saying something that should have been said). (c) People sense that they can speak up and articulate their views even if the majority in the group means otherwise, without fear of sanctions, and so experience *psychological safety*. (d) There is a *scope for agency* in place, opportunities for people to take initiatives beyond their specified roles or instructions in the group or organisation. When something unexpected and outside the script of their job responsibilities happens, they nevertheless act. (e) It is common to energise each other through encouragement and praise, and *push plus buttons*.

Communication ethics is the topic of Part 3 (Chaps. 12–14). Decisions about whether to speak up often have a significant ethical dimension. Communication ethics encompasses both freedom of speech (i.e., a freedom to articulate one's opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation or censorship) and speech responsibility (i.e., a responsibility for consequences of speaking up or remaining silent). If we only focus on freedom

of speech, people can justify to themselves and others why they remained silent in a critical situation where they could have taken an initiative to stop a negative chain of events. Freedom of speech includes the freedom not to speak. With speech responsibility in place, we can explain why the appeal to freedom of speech is not sufficient for an ethical judgement of what one should do in a situation where it is possible to influence the outcome by speaking up. A chapter on moral psychology outlines how decision-makers can experience moral dissonance when they are ordered or are tempted to do something that goes against their moral convictions. They can then either turn away from and reject the alternative or engage in a process of *moral neutralisation*, a term criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957) introduced for finding excuses and justification for why it is acceptable to act in ways that at first glance appears to conflict with one's moral convictions. The communication climate at work affects whether there is scope for dissent towards the neutralisation attempts. Whistleblowing is the topic of the final chapter of this part. It addresses how a lack of scope for addressing questionable behaviour in an organisation can lead to whistleblowing initiatives, and the concern that channels for anonymous reporting can be misused, since the messengers can hide their identities.

The book ends with a separate chapter presenting suggestions for further research and interventions regarding communication climate in organisations. I have experienced that the topic can be at the heart of fruitful research, academic theses, and student assignments. I round the book off with suggestions for researchers, students, and supervisors who are interested in designing further studies on communication climate.

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Critical Quality Moments

Abstract A *critical quality moment* is a situation where the next event to happen will determine whether the outcome is good or bad. People who are present in the situation could either engage and intervene or keep silent. Either a verbal intervention might be required to halt a causal chain of events that can lead to a negative outcome or the moment might offer an opportunity to do good by creating a positive outcome. Critical quality moments put communication at work to the test. If speaking up is normal and safe, then it is more likely that someone will do so. If the shared assumption is that becoming verbally involved is a career risk, then people are likely to remain silent. When many people are present during a critical quality moment, their pacification due to bystander effects is a risk.

Keywords Critical quality moment • Communication climate • Bystander effect • Action bias • Responsibility

On 23 June 1998, the Norwegian national football team played a World Cup match in Marseille against multiple-times world champions Brazil. Only a win would be enough to secure further participation in the tournament for Norway. With 15 minutes to go, the match was scoreless. The Norwegian coach, Egil Olsen, decided to make a substitution. He wanted to bring on Egil Østenstad, the fastest player in the team, to make runs in the space behind the tired Brazilian defenders. After 78 minutes, Østenstad

stood on the sideline with his tracksuit off, ready to enter the game. Then Brazil scored, and Norway suddenly needed to score two goals to remain in the tournament. Coach Olsen was still intent on bringing Østenstad on, despite the dramatic change in circumstances. The Brazilians would now most likely retreat further back on the pitch, leaving less space for Østenstad to make fast runs behind them. Even so, it looked like the planned substitution would go ahead.

Suddenly, one of the Norwegian substitutes shouted, “You should bring on Jostein Flo now.” Coach Olsen listened and realised the wisdom in that advice. At the last moment, he changed his mind and brought on the slower but taller forward Flo instead of Østenstad. Norway could now hit high and long balls for Flo to head on to teammates. Flo turned out to make a significant contribution in the final minutes of the match, when Norway scored the two goals they needed to beat Brazil.

Critical quality moments are situations where the communication climate in an organisation is put to the test (Kvalnes 2017, 2022). The next event to happen will affect whether the outcome will be good or bad. On a June evening in Marseille, Coach Olsen and his team experienced a critical quality moment. He was about to make the wrong tactical move by bringing on Østenstad. Olsen was known to be a meticulous tactical planner but also to be slow in responding to sudden disruptions and changes in matches. This time he was saved by a quick thinker on the bench. The substitute was Ståle Solbakken, who has gone on to become a merited football coach and is currently (i.e., in 2022) the national coach of Norway. His initiative changed the course of events and paved the way for a win. Had he remained silent, Brazil likely would have won the match. Olsen showed exemplary leadership in listening to the substitute and following his advice. In retrospect, he also praised Solbakken for his intervention and gave him the full credit for the sudden change of plan.

Critical quality moments can occur in a range of organisational settings. They take place when individuals within the organisation face a situation where they must decide whether to speak up or remain silent. The junior doctor Ida in the previous chapter was the central actor in a critical quality moment. She had important reflections to convey to her colleagues at work, input that was likely to improve patient safety at the hospital. Ida could have held back due to a fear of repercussions or doubts about how it would affect her career. This was a critical quality moment in the common history of the surgical and medical units at the hospital, and one that led to a significant breakthrough in their patient services.

A senior engineer told me about the critical quality moments that can occur in the projects in his organisation, which constructs bridges and other installations for traffic infrastructure. The safety of travellers depends on high-quality groundwork and execution from the organisation. In one instance, they were preparing the final drawings and specifications for a bridge leading traffic over a wide river. Everything looked fine, and the senior engineer was ready to send the material to the production unit. In a meeting with 15 colleagues, he laid out the calculations and drawings one final time to obtain confirmation that it was safe to bring the project forward. Most people around the table nodded and seemed satisfied with what they saw, but one newcomer had doubts and asked questions about a specific part of the construction. Is that part sufficiently robust to hold the pressure from heavy vehicles? The rest of the team now inspected that detail in the plan and realised simultaneously that the answer to the newcomer's question was no. They had overlooked a significant weakness in one part of the construction. On closer inspection, it was clear that the bridge would hold only 26% of the weight of expected traffic and would have collapsed under the pressure from a heavy vehicle. The specifications had to be revised before production could proceed.

A debrief showed that one engineer had made a calculation mistake during the planning. It had gone unnoticed by his colleagues. This was an experienced and trusted professional, with a history of being correct. Why had his colleagues not spotted the mistake earlier? This was a group with a high level of psychological safety, so it seemed that fear of repercussions for speaking up was not the issue. So how could the mistake go undetected for so long?

Reason's (1990) barrier model can shed some light on events such as these. It distinguishes between

- a mistake that sets a causal chain of events in motion;
- barriers to stop that chain of events from continuing; and
- the negative outcome that occurs if the barriers fail.

Humans are fallible beings, so mistakes will happen, no matter how experienced or well-trained people are. We thus depend on barriers to detect mistakes and stop them from causing harm. The communication climate in an organisation is normally a crucial part of the barrier system. Technological features may also be in place to stop a chain of events from causing harm. For example, an alarm might go off whenever someone has

forgotten to close the door or regulate the heat properly. However, human intervention in the shape of speaking up and using one's voice to draw attention to a mistake will often be the most important barrier component.

Solbakken performed important barrier work in the events that unfolded in the football match in Marseille. Coach Olsen had decided to bring on Østenstad, who was not the optional substitution under the circumstances. Solbakken intervened and stopped that chain of events from continuing.

One common mistake in the evaluation of barrier quality is to think that the more individuals who are involved in critical scrutiny of the processes, the better. This turned out to be a key factor in the bridge example and the reason no one identified the mistake earlier. In the engineering organisation, they were highly conscious of human fallibility and adhered to Reason's barrier framework. Fifteen engineers were supposed to keep a critical eye on the processes and speak up when they spotted irregularities or weaknesses. The idea was that by mobilising so many skilful people to do barrier work, a mistake would be noticed. However, what appears to have happened was that the high number of individuals involved weakened rather than strengthened the barrier system. One by one, each of the 15 were able to think that he or she was very busy, but that fortunately 14 other colleagues would keep an eye on the processes. When everyone in a group thinks like that, no one takes proper barrier responsibility.

The number of people in the barrier system also caused trouble in a critical quality moment for an organisation investing money in developing countries. Hackers had infiltrated their system and had managed to steer 100,000,000 NOK to their bank account, rather than to the designated account of another company in a different country. In this case, five people were supposed to scrutinise payment documents critically ahead of the transaction. In this case, a high level of psychological safety was also in place. The employees had no reason to expect repercussions if they raised a critical concern. They would be worse off not voicing a concern when in retrospect they should have done so. Each of the five people involved seems to have thought, "I am very busy, but four others will look closely at the documentation, so everything will be fine." This mentality meant none of the five studied the facts and figures carefully enough to detect the red flags that could have alerted them to the fraud.

With shared responsibility for speaking up comes the danger of passivity due to bystander effects. Bystanders tend to make what philosopher Parfit

(1984) called a “mistake in moral mathematics.” Five people who all have a responsibility for monitoring a particular process can each mistakenly believe that in this setup they only have one-fifth of the responsibility. They count the number of people involved and treat responsibility as one unit that can be spread evenly and fairly among them. The higher the number of people, the less individual responsibility exists. This is a flawed way of thinking about responsibility, but it often occurs in a group setting. We will discuss it more closely in the next chapter, which is dedicated to bystander effects and how group thinking can cause passivity and weaken barriers.

In organisational settings, it makes sense to identify critical quality moments in advance and collectively decide upon a way to cope with them. Consider the following situation that can occur in a concert hall.

The choir is on the podium, ready to sing Mozart’s *Requiem*. The conductor enters the stage and appreciates the applause from the audience. He turns to the singers and provides them with the tone from which they are supposed to start. It is the wrong tone, too deep. Unease spreads among the singers. The conductor is unaware of his mistake. Will any of the singers take an initiative to correct him?

A musicologist and conductor explained that this kind of situation occurs very rarely, but is every conductor’s nightmare (Kvalnes 2017):

A performance of Mozart’s *Requiem* is all about collective precision. The choir and their conductor have spent hundreds of hours practicing together to get the details exactly right. They are supposed to breathe, move, and sing together as one entity. The conductor needs to be sensitive to what happens among the choir members and should be able to note signs among them that something is wrong. When that does not happen, it can create a musical crisis.

How should the singers respond in such cases? The conductor may be reluctant to bring up the possibility at all because it may weaken his or her authority. It should never happen, but can do so, even with the most experienced conductors.

Authority can also be under threat in critical quality moments in aviation. The situation can be one where a senior employee commits a mistake, witnessed by a junior employee who is in a position to intervene.

The pilot is about to taxi the airplane out on the runway, although the copilot believes that he has not received the clearance signal from the control tower to do so. He can express his concern to the pilot or remain silent. The pilot is the most experienced and highly regarded professional in the company, so perhaps they have received a clearance signal from the tower after all. It would be embarrassing to sound a false alarm. What should the copilot do?

In aviation, the message is that the copilot should voice his or her concern, even if he or she may have misinterpreted the situation. When in doubt, speak up. That is the core norm drilled into the staff working together to create safety in this area. The description above was the situation at Tenerife airport on 27 March 1977, when two Boeing 747 jets collided on the runway and 583 people died. The copilot was concerned and tried to hint that the signal to enter the runway had not come. It was a wakeup call for international aviation and led to systematic and sustained efforts to strengthen communication climate (Weick 1990; Stoop and Kahan 2005).

The critical quality moments outlined so far have each been about the possibility of harm and negative outcomes. Another set of such moments occurs when an opportunity exists to do good by speaking up. A vocal initiative in this instance can generate pride, joy, and higher motivation, whereas silence can have the opposite effect. A team of colleagues has just done a tremendous job in manoeuvring the organisation out of a difficult situation. A meeting immediately after the achievement seems the time to appreciate that effort because everyone is present and can take in the praise.

Normally, the leader of the unit is the one who should take the opportunity to thank the colleague and express gratitude. What if the leader is not in the habit of doing so? Should another member of the group step forward and do it instead? Whether the meeting ends in silence or with applause for the effort can make a significant difference to the motivation and further efforts in the group, not only from the colleagues who have shone this time but to others who will witness how efforts of this kind are appreciated, or not. Celebrating efforts and wins can energise the whole group (Dutton 2003; Amabile and Kramer 2011). The critical quality moment for doing so is now, and it may last for five seconds and be gone.

One final observation regarding critical quality moments is that the optimal way to respond can be to do nothing. Action bias, an irrational preference for doing something over doing nothing, is a phenomenon noted in a range of contexts (Patt and Zeckhauser 2000; Bar-Eli et al.

2007; Paukku and Välikangas 2021). Action bias can occur both on an outcome level (i.e., people tend to consider an outcome of action to be more positive than the same outcome brought about through inaction) and on an intention level (i.e., people tend to consider an action to be more purposeful and intentional than inaction (Sunderrajan and Albarracín 2021)). In a communication context, action bias leads us to think that speaking up is preferable to remaining silent. As Edmondson and Besieux (2021) noted, the voice option can be less productive than saying nothing. People’s tendency to speak up rather than remain silent—to detrimental effect—in critical quality moments can be a feature of the communication climate in organisations. A critical quality moment can be one where a junior employee attempts to find a solution to a challenge at work, and a senior employee can choose between intervening to explain how to move forward or remain silent and let the other figure out what to do. In a communication climate favouring voice over silence, the senior is likely to speak up and spoil the opportunity for the junior to master the situation and learn.

The main purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the concept of critical quality moments as a label for situations where the communication climate in an organisation is put to the test. In a critical quality moment, the next event to happen will critically affect the quality of the delivery from the group or organisation. People may have assumptions about how well functioning the communication climate is and the likelihood that someone will address an issue. Whether they are right in their assumptions can be exposed in critical quality moments, which may come and pass, with or without a significant vocal intervention.

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CHAPTER 3

Bystander Effects

Abstract The lesson from research on the bystander effect is that the more people who are present when a verbal intervention is required to change the course of events in a positive way, the less likely it is that anyone will speak up. Although exceptions occur, where a high number of bystanders can increase the likelihood of intervention, the main pattern relevant for building a communication climate is that people tend to hesitate to break out of a passive group. The two main reasons for the bystander effect are diffusion of responsibility and pluralistic ignorance. Knowledge about these psychological phenomena can inform efforts to establish and maintain a well-functioning communication climate.

Keywords Bystander effect • Pluralistic ignorance • Diffusion of responsibility • Communication climate • Devil's advocate

A guest lecturer steps onto the podium in an auditorium filled with about 100 students. She is introduced as a professor from Copenhagen Business School, and the students are encouraged to raise their hands to comment and ask questions during the lecture. What they do not know is that the lecturer in front of them is an actor who has been instructed to talk nonsense for an hour. She can use academic terminology and hint at knowledge of the core concept in the course, but in an unstructured and nonsensical manner. This is a social psychology experiment conducted for

pedagogical purposes to see whether the students will intervene or remain silent during the lecture. The arguments they will hear from the podium will make little sense, both in the course context and otherwise. How will the students respond to the situation?

The false professor begins to speak. She uses course concepts, but haphazardly and inconsistently. Unease spreads among the students, but none of them raises their hand to ask for clarification or question the professor's claims. For a full lecture hour, the students silently listen to the nonsense from the podium. Then the course coordinator tells them that they have taken part in an experiment and that the professor is an actor. The coordinator opens the discussion for reflection and comments. Students shyly admit that they did not understand what the professor was talking about but assumed that others did because they had also remained silent. Others say that they thought it would be impolite to challenge the guest lecturer, a visitor from another country who might have misunderstood the context of the course.

The purpose of the experiment was to introduce the students to the bystander effect, a psychological phenomenon where the number of people present in a situation tends to affect decision-making (Darley and Latané 1968; Manning et al. 2007). Research on this phenomenon has indicated that the likelihood that someone will provide help to a victim decreases with an increase in the number of people who are present. Recent studies have explored bystander effects in the context of how likely it is that people will intervene when they witness cyberbullying (You and Lee 2019), sexual assault (Kettrey and Marx 2021), and violence (Levine et al. 2020). The general pattern is that the more people who are at the scene, the less likely it is that anyone will act and provide help. Some studies indicate that bystanders in a group are more likely to intervene in the presence of danger. Being part of a larger group can provide protection and enhance initiatives rather than lead to passivity (Liebst et al. 2021).

Bystander effects can occur in situations at work where a number of people spot something that should be verbally addressed and can choose to take an initiative or not (Kvalnes 2017). In a study involving employees and managers working in a Fortune 500 organisation, Hussain et al. (2019) introduced the concept of voice bystander effect. They found that the more some information is shared among employees, the less any particular employee feels individually responsible for bringing up that information with their managers. Countering bystander effects can be a core concern for building and maintaining a constructive communication

climate in an organisation or project. Such effects can occur at critical quality moments in a project process. Several project members can be aware that the person in charge of operations has made a crucial mistake, a weakness exists in the execution plan, or one particular team member has not had sufficient training and is not qualified for the task.

From the outset, one would assume that the more project members who know about these issues and who are in position to address them, the more likely it would be that one of them would do so. Research on bystander effects points in the opposite direction. It seems that the higher the number of project members who know, the more likely it is that all will remain passive and silent bystanders. In a debriefing of the situation, the project members' silence may appear to be mysterious. Why does none of them speak up? Knowledge about bystander effects can help one to understand the lack of initiative and demystify the silence.

The chapter on critical quality moments included examples where silence or a lack of initiative from those present can be explained in terms of the bystander effect and its causes. Research points to *diffusion of responsibility* as one main reason why people are passive in numbers (Darley and Latané 1968; Barron and Yechiam 2002). We tend to make the mistake in moral mathematics of thinking that responsibility is a unit we share evenly and fairly among those present (Parfit 1984). In the fake lecturer example, the 100 students in the auditorium each thought they only had 1/100 of the responsibility for speaking up about the professor who talked nonsense on the podium. With so little responsibility, it is easy to justify to oneself that one has remained silent despite having misgivings. If 15 engineers look critically at the drawings and specifications of an installation, each of them can mistakenly think they have 1/15 of the responsibility for actually applying their expertise to identify possible weaknesses. If five people are supposed to control the documentation ahead of a money transfer, each of them can mistakenly assume that they only have one-fifth the responsibility to look closely at the details. In all three examples, people can also remain passive due to an assumption that the others are sharper and more alert than they are at present.

A nurse told me that diffusion of responsibility could set in even when only two persons are involved. She worked at a hospital where from time to time they would treat prisoners, some of whom were considered dangerous. It was important to make sure that after treatment they did not leave the hospital with sharp objects that they could use to harm others with later. To make sure this did not happen, both a trained nurse and a

police officer would search each prisoner thoroughly upon departure. First, the nurse would conduct a search, and then hand over the prisoner to the police, who would conduct a second search. On one such occasion, the system failed, and a prisoner was able to smuggle a surgical knife out of the hospital. Both the nurse and the police officer had thought that the other person would do the job properly. They appeared to have split the responsibility for searching the prisoner in half, and each considered themselves to have only half the responsibility for doing a thorough search of the prisoner.

The second main reason for bystander effects goes under the label of *pluralistic ignorance*, a tendency to adjust our initial interpretation in light of what we take to be other people's interpretation of it (Miller and McFarland 1987; Rendsvig 2014). Each of the students in the auditorium may initially have thought that the professor was talking nonsense but suppressed that thought when seeing the other students remain passive and seem to understand what she was saying. They interpreted the other students' passivity as social proof (Cialdini et al. 1999) that everything was as it should be. In the engineering example, each of the 15 engineers may have had doubts about the drawings in front of them but kept silent because the other 14 seemed satisfied with what they saw. Similarly, each of the five members of the team who were responsible for quality control of the payment documents could have had misgivings about small details, but still kept silent due to the lack of protest from any of the others.

One common countermeasure against bystander effects is to give one person the role of being devil's advocate (Nemeth et al. 2001; Brohinsky et al. 2021). This person is responsible for being extra critical and looking for weaknesses in the proposals on the table. The strategy aims to avoid diffusion of responsibility because it places the task of speaking up about critical issues firmly in the hands of one person. It also attempts to counter pluralistic ignorance, because the devil's advocate is not supposed to adjust personal judgement to fit in with what other people take to be the case.

In the fake professor example, the course instructor could have elevated one student to be devil's advocate and adopt a stance that is critical of what the guest professor had to say, instead of asking the whole group what they thought about the guest lecturer. If all the individuals in a group know in advance that at some point they may be chosen to give a response, then they are likely to be more alert and prepared than they would be if the responsibility were spread thinly out to everyone in the room and would remain so for the rest of the proceedings.

Informal devil's advocates can operate in a range of organisational contexts. Some individuals always tend to speak up and take responsibility for being critical. They have not been formally assigned to that role, but their dissent emerges as a recurring pattern of the group process (Brohinsky et al. 2021). Colleagues will look to those individuals to voice a concern or point to weaknesses and mistakes in a proposal, because that is what they normally do. On one occasion, a group of Norwegian bank executives were gathered to make a major decision about the way forward. The CEO presented his preferred alternative and the arguments for it. Unease spread among the other executives, much like when a conductor gives the wrong tone to the singers in a choir. Most of them sensed that the CEO built his argument on a faulty assumption.

In this group, one person usually took on the role of being devil's advocate. She would never hesitate to address flawed assumptions or weaknesses in an argument. On this occasion, she was completely silent. The people around the table glanced at her, waiting for an initiative, but it never came. No one else voiced their concerns or pointed to the weakness in the basic assumption. A decision was made in accordance with the CEO's suggestion. Eventually, it led to exactly the sort of negative outcome that the other executives had feared.

In a debriefing, the group met to discuss why no one had opposed the CEO's proposal. Many explained that they had expected the devil's advocate to speak up, and that because she was silent, they began to have doubts about their judgement of the case. Several of them had reasoned that because she was passive, they had probably misjudged the proposal. Why had she not spoken? She explained that on the day she had been distracted by an ongoing dramatic event in her family and was checking her cell phone for news. She had not been able to focus on work-related issues. The lesson the group learned from this process was that the role of being devil's advocate should circulate among them and not lie with the same person every time.

We have seen that bystander effects can occur in situations where an initiative is needed to stop a negative turn of events. Passivity in a group can also be a challenge in situations where an opportunity exists to provide acknowledgement and praise to individuals or groups in the organisation. A group of colleagues has done an exceptional job and they deserve vocal appreciation. Here is a critical quality moment. People are about to leave the meeting, and now is the chance to express praise in front of the whole unit. Whose responsibility is it to take this initiative?

The number of people present in such situations can create passivity even here. These colleagues really deserve a show of appreciation for what they have done. Many are present and in a position to raise their voice and provide it. Who will take responsibility for doing it in a group of 50? It could be the leader of the unit, but if that person for some reason is incapacitated, someone else needs to take charge. Considering what we know about bystander effects and passivity in numbers, the unit could identify someone to take on the role of being what we can call God's advocate, with special responsibility to identify excellence and effort in the workplace and speak up about them.

Recent empirical research on the bystander effect provides a more nuanced outlook than the initial idea that a higher number of people present makes it less likely that anyone would intervene. The bystander effect weakens when social bonds exist between the person needing help and the bystanders (Levine and Manning 2013). Studies of surveillance camera footage of violent episodes indicate that danger sharply increases the likelihood of intervention from bystanders (Liebst et al. 2021; Lindegaard et al. 2021). These findings have in common that a sense of social connectedness and importance can weaken and nullify bystander effects. When we care about those affected by the events in front of us and see that what is happening will have a significant effect on them, we may be more likely to intervene and speak up than if we were witnessing strangers in trouble but not in real danger.

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that knowledge about bystander effects—what causes them as well as what strengthens and weakens them—is highly relevant for efforts to build and maintain a constructive communication climate. Diffusion of responsibility can occur even among the best of colleagues. Pluralistic ignorance can also emerge in settings where colleagues glance at each other, without saying a word. We have seen that it can make sense to appoint a devil's advocate and a God's advocate in work settings to place responsibility for making interventions firmly with specific individuals. We have also observed that these roles need to circulate and not stay with the same individuals. Long-serving advocates may have bad days where they are distracted from seeing events clearly or lack energy to speak up. On those days, their silence can be interpreted wrongly as a sign that everything is fine, and therefore no one calls for an intervention. An alternative is to give more people experience in keeping a critical and appreciative eye on proceedings at work and speaking up about what they see, which may serve to mobilise dissent and appreciation that is more authentic in work contexts.

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The Invisible Gorilla

Abstract The invisible gorilla experiment demonstrates that people can be blind to aspects of a situation even when such aspects are placed well within their field of vision. Inattention blindness can be an obstacle to spotting important aspects of ongoing projects and workplace processes. People tend to see what is in front of them only if they deliberately direct their attention towards it, which means they can be blind to ethical and other questionable aspects of their work. A significant purpose of having a well-functioning communication climate is to make identifying and speaking up about invisible gorillas the norm. Newcomers in an organisation can be a phenomenal resource in spotting and drawing attention to blind spots. They see things differently because they have not yet been socialised into observing the environment in the same way as everyone else in the workplace.

Keywords Invisible gorilla • Inattention blindness • Confirmation bias • Communication climate • System 1 and system 2

In a famous psychological experiment, viewers watched a one-minute film in which three people in white clothes and three people in black clothes pass basketballs to each other (Simons and Chabris 1999). Each team has one basketball, and they move around in a tight area while they pass it among each other. The task for the viewer is to count the number of passes

the team in white manages to complete. They are supposed to ignore the movements and passes from the team in black. The most focused viewers manage to come up with the right number, which is 15 passes. Then they are asked whether they noticed anything else during the film. Some say that they glimpsed a black figure moving through the playing area. When watching the film for a second time, everyone can see a person dressed up as a gorilla walking slowly into the middle of the area. The gorilla stops and bangs its chest, before it slowly moves on and disappears out of view. When focusing on the counting, people tend to be completely blind to the gorilla. All their attention is on the basketball that is being passed from the hands of one player in white to the next and keeping track of the number of passes. When they have the chance to watch the film a second time, without the counting task, they see the gorilla clearly and distinctly. Most are deeply amazed that they were unable to see it the first time. The gorilla is big, takes up considerable space, and moves quite slowly. It is not a tiny mouse running across the area. How is it possible to be blind to the gorilla?

When I first came across the gorilla film, I was struck by how it could be used to invite reflections on the ways people can be blind to ethical aspects of their behaviour. Those aspects can be obvious and visible to others who have a more distanced view but hidden for those who are closest to them. “Spot the gorilla” became my opening invitation when I facilitated ethics work in organisations (Kvalnes 2006). I facilitated dilemma training and ethical reflections in both the private and public sectors. The initiative to invite my colleagues and me would often come in the aftermath of ethical scandals in an organisation or industry. A contract to drill for oil in Iran had been secured through corruption. A financial institution sold high-risk products to unassuming clients. Top management in a company hired close friends or romantic relations to executive positions. Decision-makers systematically pursued self-interest at the expense of their employers or clients’ interest. One pattern in these cases was that the decision-makers often failed to notice the unethical nature of their behaviour. For others looking at the processes from a distance, it was obvious that the initiatives were unethical. Those who were directly and personally involved were so focused on other tasks that they were blind to the unethical nature of their activities.

I also wonder about ethical blindness when I encounter unethical suggestions and initiatives in my professional work. When I am invited to talk about ethics in organisations or at industry conferences, I tend to say yes, if it does not conflict with other engagements. On two occasions, I have

faced unethical suggestions when I have turned down such invitations because I have already agreed to talk about ethics in another setting at the specified time. These were the two responses I received when saying no on those occasions:

- What if we pay you extra to come to our organisation instead? Would you reconsider?
- Do you mind if we put your name in the program, and then on the day of the conference we can say that unfortunately you were unable to give the talk due to illness?

The first organiser offered to pay me extra for breaking a promise to come to one organisation to talk about ethics so that I would visit their organisation to talk about ethics instead. The second invited me to be part of a lie to the participants at their conference. On both occasions, the suggestions were impulsive. No deliberate thought processes preceded them. The initiators were applying what Kahneman called *System 1* decision-making, the quick and intuitive way, rather than the analytic and slow *System 2* method (Kahneman 2013). In the conversations that I had with them immediately afterwards, it became clear that they were initially blind to the unethical aspect of their suggestions but were able to spot it when slowing down and giving proper attention to them. Then they could also appreciate the paradoxical dimension of their impulsive suggestions, using unethical means to secure a contribution about ethics in their organisation.

We can interpret unethical behaviour as an indication of character flaws in the decision-maker. Here we have an immoral person, someone acting from dubious moral standards. The invisible gorilla phenomenon provides an alternative perspective. People may be so eager to solve a problem that they quickly identify and articulate a solution, without considering the ethical aspects. Once they slow down and watch the film a second time, so to speak, they can see the unethical nature of their initial suggestion and retract it. This is what happened on both the occasions above. When the initiators had some time to realise what they had suggested, they saw the situation differently and realised that they had come up with an unethical proposal.

The gorilla experiment serves as a reminder of why it can be fruitful to take a philosophical view of not only specific incidents and situations but also of one's practices and habits more broadly. Socrates invited his fellow citizens of Athens to take a step back and critically reflect on their priorities

and ways of living. He warned against becoming trapped in negative and destructive patterns. By adopting some distance to one's everyday activities, it would be possible to reconsider and rearrange them to be in better harmony with what one considers meaningful and worthwhile. In a hectic and nonreflective life, a person can end up following patterns that do not conform to what one truly values and holds dearest.

Researchers refer to the phenomenon illustrated by the invisible gorilla experiment as *inattentional blindness* (Simons and Chabris 1999; Mack 2003; Kreitz et al. 2016). The subcategory I introduce here can be called *ethical inattentional blindness*. It most obviously includes situations where people are blind to the unethical aspects of their and others' behaviour. It is also possible to be blind to ethically positive aspects of one's or other people's behaviour. A person might perform an ethically good deed but not think of it in ethical terms because it comes naturally to them or has become a habit.

Organisations can prepare for inattentional blindness among employees and stakeholders by building a communication climate where it is normal to spot and speak out about the gorillas. We can learn from the experiment that everyone has a limited capacity to notice important aspects of what is going on in the workplace. High-tempo and complex tasks increase the probability that we will be blind to significant elements in the projects on which we are working. Each individual notices and dwells on different aspects of a situation. A communication climate can facilitate conversations about the nuances and details that different colleagues see. It is likely that we turn up for work wearing what we may call *routine glasses*. Work becomes routine, and we tend to inspect the work environment and the activities happening there through the same familiar lens. The point is relevant far beyond ethics: Wearing our routine glasses, we may fail to see new developments, opportunities, obstacles, and so on. Colleagues in the team may have changes and become more reliable or less reliable than they used to be. What used to be a stable development in the right direction could imperceptibly change from day to day, and now we are heading in the wrong direction. Research on inattentional blindness tells us that we can be slow to notice changes in the organisation because we are studying the world through the same lenses, as always, or through what I have suggested we call *routine glasses*.

Newcomers in an organisation can be a phenomenal resource when it comes to overcoming or countering inattentional blindness. They enter the workplace with a fresh pair of eyes and can see important things that

the more experienced people fail to notice. Here is an example: A newly recruited engineer at the local offices of the Norwegian Road Authority in Bodø, a town in the north of the country, participated in a gorilla experiment I conducted at the beginning of a workshop on communication climate. The participants and I dwelled on the ways people who are new to an organisation can spot the gorillas that are invisible to more experienced colleagues. The new engineer explained to the group that he had set eyes on something that his more experienced colleagues appeared to be unaware of or ignore. At the end of each workday, he would manoeuvre his car out of the parking area outside the offices and head towards the entrance to the main road. When he came to a spot where he was going to enter the main road, he would look left and right to check for traffic. However, he could not see whether any cars were coming from the right. Why? A big sign blocked his view. The sign said “Welcome to the Norwegian Road Authority.” This newcomer brought attention to the fact that his employer, responsible for road safety in Norway, had put up a sign that created a dangerous situation whenever a driver attempted to enter the main road outside its local offices in Bodø.

When the newcomer had finished speaking, his colleagues looked at each other in disbelief. Was this really the case? One of the more experienced colleagues confirmed that the newcomer was right. He remembered that the sign had caused uproar when it had been put in place some years ago. Everyone agreed that it was a threat to traffic safety and that it had to be removed. Then the days, weeks, months, and years went, and people became used to the sign. One engineer said that everyone who worked there and used the parking area knew that a driver had to lower his or her head down to the dashboard of the car and look beneath the sign to check for traffic from the right. Now, everyone agreed that this was unacceptable and that the sign should be removed as soon as possible.

Kahneman (2013) noted the double nature of inattentional blindness. Not only are we blind to the gorilla but our surprise in spotting it upon reviewing events means that we are also blind to our inability to see important aspects of what is in front of us. We can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness. The example from the Norwegian Road Authority illustrates this point. When the newcomer brought attention to the dangerous sign, his colleagues became aware that they had gradually become blind to it, and their surprise in rediscovering the sign caused a realisation that they had been blind to their tendency to be blind to phenomena that are in front of them.

Research on inattentional blindness indicates that we rarely see what we are looking at, unless our attention is directed at it (Mack 2003). A closely related obstacle to rational decision-making is the tendency we have to seek information that confirms our beliefs and to ignore or distort information that contradicts them, a phenomenon called *confirmation bias* (Nickerson 1998). Once we have made up our minds about something, we tend to interpret new and incoming information in ways that confirm our hypotheses or beliefs and disregard open and available evidence suggesting that we should revise them. We selectively seek information that is consistent with our prior beliefs. Confirmation bias is a pervasive phenomenon that affects the way people monitor information and the way they protect and strengthen their beliefs about a wide range of issues. An example in present times is the way so-called climate sceptics dismiss growing scientific evidence that shows human-caused climate change and rising temperatures are affecting living systems, leading to dramatic ecological change and destruction (Zhou and Shen 2022).

Even with confirmation bias, it is possible for organisations to counter the negative consequences of it by developing a communication climate where it is normal to challenge and question each other's beliefs and habits. Confirmation bias affects decision-making in a range of professional contexts, and there is need for friction to neutralise it. Researchers can have exaggerated confidence in their initial hypotheses and become blind to disconfirming evidence. Schoolteachers can have fixed beliefs about the levels of performance they can expect from their pupils and miss important developments in their learning processes. People who work with recruitment in organisations can have first impressions about candidates and fail to take in information that gives them reasons to reconsider those initial beliefs.

In terms of societal relevance, confirmation bias in police work deserves particular attention. Police investigators can be under pressure to find out who committed a particular crime. Once they have identified a suspect and become convinced they have found the culprit, they can become blind to information pointing towards other possible scenarios in which the suspect is innocent. Confirmation bias can also affect prosecutors, judges, and jury members and lead to wrongful convictions (Rassin et al. 2010).

How can the police counter the tendency to become blind to information disconfirming their hypotheses? One experienced police investigator has told me that in his unit officers have become increasingly aware of confirmation bias and other cognitive traps that can threaten the quality of

their investigative work. One countermeasure has been to operate with several hypotheses simultaneously in the beginning of an investigation rather than just one. By waiting before they narrow down the number of hypotheses, they can gather and consider a broader set of evidence. Another initiative meant to neutralise confirmation bias is to split the work between colleagues so that the critical evaluation of one hypothesis in light of available information is not conducted by the investigator who initiated it. Research indicates that it makes sense to distribute responsibility in this manner. Presumptions of guilt can affect the questioning style and treatment of information (Hill et al. 2008). One scenario study found that police officers who had decided to apprehend a suspect chose more guilt-presumptive interrogation questions than those who had not partaken in the decision to apprehend. They also rated the suspects as less trustworthy (Lidén et al. 2018).

In this chapter, we have seen that inattentional blindness and confirmation bias can trigger detrimental decision-making and behaviour in the workplace. The invisible gorilla experiment vividly demonstrates why organisations depend on a well-functioning communication climate as a platform for making rational and responsible decisions. Inattentional blindness can cause us to make decisions that are irrational and unethical in light of what we want to achieve and the way we want to proceed. We rarely see what is in front of our eyes unless our attention is directed at it. Due to ethical inattentional blindness, we can become involved in ethical misbehaviour in our quest to reach some economic or strategic goal. We can learn from research in this area that if we do not attend actively and consciously to ethical aspects of what we are currently doing, we are likely to become blind to them. Responsible leadership entails asking questions such as is what we are doing fair and reasonable? Are we sufficiently responsive to stakeholder concerns? Are we behaving in an honest and transparent manner? Questions such as these can bring ethical aspects to the forefront of our attention.

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Blind Spots

Abstract The Johari Window is a figure Luft and Ingham (Human Relations Training News 5:6–7, 1961) developed to stimulate self-awareness and examine social relations. It distinguishes between aspects of a person’s attitudes, behaviours, and habits known and unknown to a person and to others. The most interesting quadrant in the Johari Window from a communication climate perspective is the *blind spot*. There we find the aspects that are unknown to a person but known to others. The communication climate at work affects the time it takes for information to move from the blind spot into the *arena*, where it is known both to the person and to others. The figure can also be applied more broadly to what goes on in the workplace or in a particular project. The information about the progress and obstacles in a project should be in the arena but may be hidden away in one of the other three quadrants of the Johari Window for various reasons.

Keywords Johari Window • Communication climate • Blind spot • Inattention blindness • Agency

Birgitte Lange is the general secretary of Save the Children in Norway. At the beginning of her tenure, she spent time in Malawi to learn about the organisation’s activities there. She came back with new insights and understandings of the predicament for children in developing countries and

ways her organisation contributes to improving their living conditions. During her stay, she worked closely with local employees and supporters. Once back from her trip, she held a presentation to employees in Norway about her experiences, impressions, and learning points for further efforts to help children living under precarious conditions. The presentation was well received, and she was happy to have been able to share important new insights and reflections with her closest colleagues in Oslo.

After the presentation, a member of her team approached her and wanted to talk. This colleague had noticed something of which Lange was most likely not aware. During the presentation, she had shown photos of colleagues in the African country. She had pointed to and used first names for all the white colleagues but did the same to a lesser degree with black colleagues. They had for the most part remained a nameless group of people. The colleague explained that this was a tendency also found in media coverage from African countries. White people were identified by name, whereas black people were presented as anonymous members of a group. The colleague thought Lange should be aware that she had followed this pattern in her presentation.

Lange was taken aback by this observation from the colleague. Discriminating between white and black colleagues in this manner had not been her intention. She is the head of an organisation where it is particularly important to treat everyone equally, and not based on skin colour. She was grateful to the colleague for pointing out her failure to name the black colleagues and for doing so face-to-face rather than in front of everyone during the presentation. Now she had a chance to reflect on her behaviour and its causes, as well as to develop a more inclusive perspective.

Lange has shared this example with her colleagues as part of an effort to build and maintain a strong communication climate in the organisation. She has highlighted that she encourages, appreciates, and values this sort of intervention in the organisation. She has exposed her vulnerability and dependency upon other people to speak up when they observe mishaps and blunders. By sharing the example, she also gives credit to the colleague who took the initiative to point out her discriminative behaviour. This is a powerful way for a top manager to signal to an organisation or group that everyone can make mistakes and we all depend on people around us to speak up and intervene. Studies show that an effective way to lower the threshold for voicing a concern is to neutralise hierarchies. When the top manager shares examples of her fallibility in this manner, others

who are lower down in the hierarchy are more likely to do the same. Honest narratives from the top about their mistakes can serve to communicate that although formal hierarchies may be in place, when it comes to being fallible, vulnerable, and dependent upon each other, we are all on the same level.

What Lange experienced can be seen as another example of an invisible gorilla, as outlined in the previous chapter. She failed to notice a rather obvious and visible aspect of the way she talked about colleagues in Malawi. This aspect was in no way hidden from view, but Lange failed to notice it because she was focused on presenting her experiences during her trip. She suffered from inattentional blindness (Simons and Chabris 1999; Mack 2003; Kreitz et al. 2016), seeing only those aspects of the situation to which she deliberately and actively attended.

In my interview with Lange, she said that her failure to use names for the Black colleagues in Malawi was in her blind spot. That particular term is a key component in the Johari Window, a figure Luft and Ingham (1961) developed to stimulate self-awareness and examine social relations (Table 5.1).

The Johari Window was initially designed to analyse personal relations. In the *arena* quadrant, we find the attitudes, values, motivations, and behaviours that are known to the individual and to others. The *façade* quadrant holds aspects of self that the individual decides to keep private and not share with others. The *unknown* quadrant is for those aspects that neither the individual nor other people are aware of, whereas in the *blind spot* we find everything that is unknown to the individual but known to one or more others.

Lange's practice of naming only the White colleagues was in her blind spot, and the intervention from the colleague brought this fact about her behaviour into their common arena. By keeping the conversation private, the colleague wisely chose not to put the information into the wider arena available to everyone who participated in the meeting. Later, the general secretary decided to share the example with a wider audience within the organisation, and so placed it in the arena.

Table 5.1 The Johari Window

	<i>Known to me</i>	<i>Unknown to me</i>
Known to others	Arena	Blind spot
Unknown to others	Façade	Unknown

The original purpose of the Johari Window was to enhance self-awareness and explore our relations to other people. It can serve as a starting point for personal reflections about what other people might see and notice in your behaviour and attitudes as well as what you want them to know and believe about you. I have also found that it is useful to investigate group processes and the information that is known and unknown to participants in various kinds of projects. A project manager can be concerned that relevant information about progress and obstacles in a project is widely shared among participants. It should all be in the arena quadrant rather than distributed in other parts of the Johari Window. A project manager can also possess information that is unavailable to other project members and decide whether to keep it in the façade quadrant or place it in the arena.

A range of communication climate issues can be analysed in Johari Window terms. We have seen that the silence mystery can occur in situations where people choose to remain silent instead of speaking up about what they observe, know, or suspect to be the case. Looking back, it may seem that the obvious and reasonable thing to do was sound the alarm and make the others aware of the problem. Instead, someone decided not to move information from one quadrant to another, from the façade or the blind spot to the arena. A project member may be the only one to observe an obstacle to the successful completion of the project. The other team members might have a blind spot, and it is up to the project member to take the initiative to share knowledge and place the information they were missing into the arena quadrant. An initiative of this sort could save the project, but a project member might choose to say nothing. This is a typical silence mystery, which can best be solved by initially attending to its causes rather than blaming or criticizing a project member. Collins (2001) described an “autopsy without blame” as a crucial quality of investigations into the root causes of why things have gone wrong. It makes people more likely to share their observations and explain their behaviour than it would if the inquiry is seen as one where the aim is to find explanations rather than establish blame (Kvalnes 2017).

For a person who realises that a colleague or team member is unaware of an important aspect of what they are doing or about to do, a question of timing and context arises. You understand that the other has a serious blind spot issue and he or she would benefit from being made aware of it. When and how do you tell them? Lange’s colleague decided not to bring up the issue with others present and asked for a face-to-face meeting directly afterwards.

Others in similar situations can hesitate and postpone the conversation. The philosopher Anne Rose Røsbak Feragen told me about an employee in a financial institution who had misunderstood the form to fill in for client engagements. She was a newcomer to the organisation, and several of her colleagues were aware that she was filling in the form the wrong way. None of them took action to show the newcomer how to use the form correctly. Instead, they would take turns correcting her mistakes behind her back. The fact that she used the form incorrectly remained in her blind spot for nearly two years, and she found out about it by coincidence rather than through an intervention from a colleague. It is likely that she was irritated and puzzled by the lack of response from the people with whom she was working. Why had none of them taken the initiative to clarify the proper procedure with her? It is likely that some sort of bystander effect was part of the explanation. Many people knew, and they apparently shared evenly the responsibility for bringing information from the colleague's blind spot into the arena quadrant. Each of them could assume that the personal responsibility for intervening was minimal, and so remained silent.

One lesson from this example is that if one has something important to say to a colleague in the shape of clarifying a misunderstanding and moving information out of the person's blind spot, one should not postpone relaying it. A form of procrastination can take place here. The longer one delays the initiative, the harder it becomes to step forward and deliver the message. If your colleague has misunderstood and incorrectly performed a task for two years and you finally decide that enough is enough, then you need to convey two pieces of information to the colleague on this occasion. First, you must convey to the colleague that he or she is not performing the task correctly, and second, you must admit that you have known it for two years without telling them. The longer the wait, the more difficult it will be to explain and justify the delay. Blind spot procrastination is an avoidable phenomenon.

In their seminal work on human agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) described it as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, oriented towards the past, the present, and the future at any given moment. They described the way agency takes place in the flow of time. Routines and habits for agency in the present are established in the past and shape out orientation towards the future. This temporal perspective helps to understand why it is important to intervene early when one or more colleagues can be about to establish misguided habits. General Secretary Lange is grateful that her colleague took her aside to point out her

discrimination between White and Black colleagues in her presentation, thereby disrupting a process that could otherwise have led to a questionable habit. The employee who had misunderstood the form used in the financial institution was not similarly fortunate with colleague intervention and developed a faulty routine.

The Johari Window can serve as a tool to do applied philosophy in the Socratic tradition. We can use it to explore our relations to other people and to investigate possible blind spots in our practices and ways of living. For my part, one encounter with another philosopher proved to be decisive for a redirection in my academic career. I was a PhD student at the University of Oslo, working on a dissertation in ethics. One of our visiting professors was Michael Bratman, who had worked extensively on agency and rationality. He saw human beings as planning animals and theorised about the ways our desires and intentions shape shared and individual agency (Bratman 1999, 2013). While he was in Oslo, he noticed how preoccupied I was with administrative work for the professors at the philosophy department. I had a talent for planning and organising academic events and kept receiving assignments to do so. It was enjoyable, and people appreciated and acknowledged my efforts. Using the terms from his theory of rationality and agency, Bratman expressed a concern that the administrative tasks took attention away from my studies and work on the dissertation. He encouraged me to identify my most important hopes and aspirations and to consider whether my current work habits were likely to realise them. With this intervention, he brought a serious blind spot issue to my attention. I was about to establish a routine where the exploration of my dissertation topic took second place to serving the professors. Bratman's Socratic intervention made me rethink my priorities and put my studies back on track.

In this chapter, we have seen that the Johari Window can be helpful in analysing and understanding communication climate challenges at work. The figure was originally introduced to explore personal relations but can also serve to study knowledge sharing and information flow in organisational contexts. A project manager can wonder whether all the relevant information about the progress and status of the project is in the arena quadrant, or whether any project members have blind spots. It may also be that some important facts affecting the progress of the project are in the unknown quadrant, hidden to all project members. The Johari Window can serve as a tool to understand inattentive blindness and the invisible gorilla phenomena in organisations. It also helps to conceptualise the

silence mystery and the outcomes that take place when individuals remain passive when witnessing events where their intervention can make a significant positive difference.

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CHAPTER 6

Help

Abstract The communication climate at work is put to the test when people contemplate seeking or offering help. These can be critical quality moments. A silence mystery can occur when employees refrain from seeking help even when help is at hand and they are struggling to cope on their own. The social cost of admitting they are unable to manage on their own can lead them to keep silent. They take pride in being independent of others, and they are reluctant to admit their limitations. The reasons people remain bystanders and do not offer help when they witness colleagues who clearly need it can also be a silence mystery. Breaking the silence in both domains can mobilise positive behaviours of helping and supporting others that in turn influence the helping and supporting behaviours of others.

Keywords Communication climate • Helpfulness • Help • Prosocial behaviour • Systems of holding back

The Akerselva River runs through the city of Oslo where I live, dividing it into easterly and westerly parts. During summer, it is popular to cool down and swim in the river. After rainy periods, excess water flows down the river, and the current can be strong. Local water authorities have put up signs warning against these occasional strong currents. When they occur, people tend to be cautious about swimming and stay closer to the

riverbank. Only the more athletic adults will step into the river and manoeuvre towards the middle of the stream. On one such day, I was sitting next to the river and noticed a young man standing alone in the river, with water splashing from his body. Other people were sunbathing on the riverbank, and the few who went into the river stayed in it very briefly. The young man remained in the water, on his own. He looked fit and strong, and he appeared to be in control of the situation. From time to time, he seemed to take steps towards the riverbank, but then he retreated slowly to the same spot in the middle of the river.

After some time, people at the shore started to pack their things and walk away from the river, heading home. The young man remained at the same spot in the middle of the river. At one point, a person shouted out to him, “Do you need help?” The barely audible answer was “Yes.” It turned out the young, athletic man was stuck in the river. His small steps towards the riverbank had been failed attempts to get out of the water. The current had repeatedly pushed him back into the same spot. Now, a group of people joined hands and they made a line into the river and managed to drag him out of it. He sat for a long time on the riverbank to catch his breath, a cold and exhausted man, the grateful receiver of help from caring bystanders.

Here we have another silence mystery. Why did the man in the river not call out for help? Why did he remain silent even though he was stuck in the river and had made several failed attempts to get out of it? He must have observed that people were about to leave the area and that it would soon be empty of potential helpers. Why did he not simply use his voice and make a request for help to escape the river? I never had the chance to talk to him, so I can only guess at the reasons for his silence. He probably did not know any of the potential helpers on the shore. It is likely that he thought it would be embarrassing to seek help from strangers. Perhaps the initiative would threaten his self-image. This was an athletic person, who seemed to have the muscles and physical strength necessary to manoeuvre freely in the raging river. It turned out that he was not such a person, and he might have been reluctant to admit his limitations to himself and others.

After witnessing this event, I became curious about the threshold for seeking help from others in work environments (Kvalnes 2017). I facilitated workshops in organisations and narrated the story, using it as a starting point for exploring how easy or difficult it is to ask colleagues for support. The story about the silence of the solitary man in the river generated more examples from people who had observed similar incidents at

work, leaders, coworkers, and colleagues who had clearly had a need for help but had hesitated, remained silent, and tried to manage on their own. These narratives functioned as starting points for reflections about how to create a communication climate where it is normal to seek and provide help at work.

I also sought out research on helping in organisations. The more general term applied in research is *prosocial behaviour*. In recent decades, a range of studies has mapped the way prosocial behaviour affects organisational life (Brief and Motowidlo 1986; Grant and Shandell 2022). What do we know about the threshold for asking others for help? How can we apply that knowledge to facilitate and foster helping behaviour in organisations? Lee (1997) indicated that people might be reluctant to seek help because it implies incompetence, dependence, and, therefore, powerlessness. Another study by the same researcher showed that the threshold for seeking help can be particularly high for males and for people in male-oriented occupational roles, as well as when the task is central to the organisation's core competence (Lee 2002). Applied to the man-in-the-river example, this study indicated a gender dimension might have been involved in his silence. Males appear to perceive the social cost of seeking help to be higher than females do. Many of the potential helpers on the riverbank on this day were females. Perhaps the man found it particularly embarrassing to seek help and expose his dependence on other people in front of them.

In workshop settings, I have experienced that a presentation of the gender finding has generated examples from outside the work context, where men refuse to ask for help. Most of these stories are about car trips in unknown territory. Should we stop and ask for directions? A male driver typically refuses to do so and he will try again to make sense of the map and the terrain, without assistance from available locals who could have clarified the confusion instantly. GPS systems in cars have made this particular kind of help seeking superfluous, but the examples confirm that the social cost of asking for help appears to be higher for men than it is for women.

A range of studies of helping in organisations have added to the understanding of the reasons why people hold back and remain silent even when they have urgent need for help and helpers are available. Employees may be reluctant to seek help because they take pride in doing things alone and are distrustful of those whose assistance they could use (Amabile et al. 2014). One study showed that individuals who have demonstrated high

levels of creativity quite surprisingly could be less inclined to seek help from others. They have gained a reputation for being particularly creative and may withhold requests for help because of a desire to uphold the perception of being highly creative persons. Offering to help others is something they are willing to do because it aligns well with their reputation as creatives, but receiving help poses a threat to their status (Carnevale et al. 2021).

Situations where we face a choice of seeking help or proceeding alone or a choice of offering to help someone or leaving that person to manage on his or her own are critical quality moments. What we decide to do next will have a significant effect on further developments. If the organisation has identified these types of critical quality moments in advance, employees may have some guidance in place regarding what they are expected to do. The communication climate may or may not have been designed to prepare employees for critical moments such as when to offer help.

The communication climate for seeking and offering help can differ within an organisation. A nurse explained to me that she worked shifts in two sections of a hospital. On the fourth floor, she would not hesitate to approach a colleague when she was in doubt and needed help. She might have forgotten the way a particular set of medicines should be prepared, or the special needs of the patient in room 407. It should all be documented in the files but might not be. In this section, the colleagues were helpful and supportive whenever such issues arose. They were patient and they would carefully explain the task to the nurse. However, on the fifth floor, people were busier and they often met inquiries for help with irritation. The nurse hesitated to seek support and often tried to manage as best she could on her own. She had a sense that patient safety was considerably higher on the fourth floor, where the barrier for asking colleagues for help was lower. Under the same roof, in the same organisation, two distinctly different help-seeking practices were in operation. The nurse had no doubt about which floor she would have preferred to be a patient on if she should ever end up as one.

The communication climate for talking about help affects the ways people in a group and organisation collaborate. Norms and habits can be in place regarding the ways colleagues

- ask for help when they need it;
- offer help when they see someone who needs it;
- provide help, verbally or in other ways;

- show gratitude towards the helper afterwards; and
- appreciate and praise the help provided to other colleagues.

The above is not a complete list of communication issues that can arise in connection with helping but it indicates where the critical quality moments can occur. A person can be in doubt about whether to speak up or keep quiet in situations where it is an option to take an initiative of one or the other.

It can also make a difference whether the initiative comes from the helper or the one seeking help. One study implied that reactive helping (assistance offered in response to a request for help) is viewed more positively by the recipient than anticipatory helping (assistance offered in advance of being asked) is (Harari et al. 2021). Research into helping behaviour is useful in providing advice about ways to enhance and structure help so that the perception of social cost is lowered.

Newcomers in an organisation can be in doubt about whether they are in a workplace where it is common and acceptable to seek help. They can assume that the social cost of asking for assistance from a colleague is high or that they are supposed to prove that they deserve the position allotted to them. In my study of fallibility at work (Kvalnes 2017), I came across two examples from the healthcare sector where newly recruited young men wanted to demonstrate their independence and professional skills to their more experienced colleagues and refrained from seeking help in critical situations. Both situations occurred in a hospital setting. The new recruits were ambitious male doctors, eager to gain a favourable position in the eyes of their colleagues. In both cases, the attempts to sort out patient complications independently and without assistance from available senior colleagues led to patient injury. The young doctors clearly should have sought guidance from more experienced colleagues. In both cases, such colleagues were present and even explicitly offered to help. The newcomers turned down the offers, wanting to master the situation on their own to prove to themselves and others that they were capable, independent, and deserved the position in which they had recently been placed.

In the aftermath of both cases, the question was whether the negative outcome came about because of individual or systemic failure. The newcomers claimed that no one had told them that it was normal and expected of them to seek help when in doubt, whereas the hospital management argued that it should not be necessary to explain to professional health workers that the foundation of patient safety is collaboration rather than

solo efforts. That much should be obvious to everyone. These incidents proved that it was not so obvious and resulted in a rethinking of the opening conversations with newcomers to the organisation.

Both hospital cases took management by surprise. Both were framed as silence mysteries. Why did the newcomers not speak up and seek help, the most obvious way forward when one is struggling and in doubt about serious patient issues? They had competent resources available, and still chose to be silent about their uncertainties and proceed on their own. Knowledge about the psychology of help seeking can be crucial when an organisation attempts to encourage employees to ask for and provide help to each other. Bohns and Flynn (2010) outlined the way management often underestimates the discomfort of asking other people for help.

Confirmation bias can affect people's perceptions of whether a colleague needs help or will be able to perform a task on their own. We depend on a communication climate where it is common to challenge, question, and explore assumptions about colleagues' abilities to fix things on their own. As I have noted in a previous study (Kvalnes 2017), two alternatives to be conscious of are that

- a colleague who appears to be sufficiently competent and in control may actually be in trouble and need help; and
- a colleague who appears to be in trouble and needs help may actually be sufficiently competent and in control.

Going back to the man in the river, he appeared to the bystanders to be a person who was sufficiently athletic and strong to escape the river without help. That may also have been the case from the beginning, but then he gradually began to lose energy and became unable to move out of the current on his own. Research on confirmation bias has indicated that we are slow to register changes and developments in a situation. Once we have found a label for another person regarding competence and abilities, our gaze will tend to pick up information that confirms the correctness of that label. Therefore, we regularly need to question assumptions about people's competence, self-sufficiency, and need for help.

Inattentional blindness can also cause us to be unaware that a colleague needs help. It can happen right in front of our eyes, but we fail to see it because our attention is fixed on other features of the situation. A colleague who needs help can also be blind to the fact that their colleagues would be willing to step in to help.

The dynamics of seeking and offering help can occur in settings where two or more people consider whether to approach each other with requests for help. The Scottish philosopher David Hume tells a powerful story about two neighbouring farmers who needed help. Collaboration and reciprocity would benefit both, but one of them needed to break the silence and take the initiative. They were able to help each other, but mutual mistrust had led to silence and passivity.

Your corn is ripe to-day; mine will be so to-morrow. 'Tis profitable for us both, that I shou'd labour with you to-day, and that you shou'd aid me to-morrow. I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me. I will not, therefore, take any pains upon your account; and should I labour with you upon my own account, in expectation of a return, I know I shou'd be disappointed, and that I shou'd in vain depend upon your gratitude. Here then I leave you to labour alone: You treat me in the same manner. The seasons change; and both of us lose our harvests for want of mutual confidence and security. (Hume 1737/1975)

Hume's story is an example of how a system of holding back can stifle collective effort. Such systems occur in dyadic relations, where both parties will benefit from doing something for the other, but neither of them will take the initiative. Both mistakenly think along the terms, "I will not contribute to an improvement in this relation, because the other person will not contribute or reciprocate." They are locked in a misunderstanding, and nothing happens (Kvalnes 2017).

Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2006) vividly described how systems of holding back might be detrimental to human collaboration. People tend to remain silent and passive in situations where they are in a position to make a positive contribution due to an assumption that other people are likely to remain silent and passive. These systems cannot be overcome permanently but are likely to return to hamper efforts even in the best-functioning organisations.

The concept (of holding back) refers to mutually aggregating spirals which lead people to hold back contributions they could make because others hold back contributions they could make. We believe such systems are fundamental to human interaction—indeed, our conviction is that human interaction has a tendency to slide into systems of holding back unless conscious effort is launched to counter this tendency. A negative dance of holding back will prevail unless it is countered time and again. (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2006)

When it comes to establishing and maintaining a communication climate where it is normal to seek, provide, and be thankful for help, the lesson is that it requires continuous effort. The negative dance of holding back will return as soon as we begin assuming that the communication work has finished and the climate for helping and reciprocity has been permanently established.

My contribution to the vocabulary for thinking about systems of holding back is a distinction between fixed and fluid systems (Kvalnes 2017). We can imagine that Hume's farmers have been neighbours for many years. The noncollaborative relation between them has been cemented through years of mistrust and silence. A fixed system of holding back is in place, and it will take considerable effort to break it open. Other systems of holding back may be more fluid because they have existed for a shorter time and may thus be easier to break up and substitute with reciprocity and efforts that are of mutual benefit between people who need help.

It can be a mystery that people who need help and have potential helpers in their vicinity nevertheless remain silent. Why do they not simply voice a request for help? It can also be mysterious that witnesses who watch a colleague struggle also decide to keep out of the situation and be silent. We have seen that a range of psychological factors can cause such silences. Embarrassment, discomfort, distrust, and perceptions of social cost can make people hold back.

It is also worth noting that silence can be a productive stance in situations where help would speed up a process or eliminate the struggle. As Edmondson and Besieux (2021) noted in their article on the productive conversation matrix, both speaking up and being silent can have constructive and destructive dimensions. They argue that silence can be a better contribution to a workplace conversation than voicing one's ideas might be. It is undesirable to have a situation where everyone voices their concerns energetically at the same time, adding irrelevant points and making the situation more difficult for those concerned. We can add that silence and withholding help can be a constructive option in situations where a person is working hard on a task. It can be tempting to intervene and point the way forward, but an initiative of this kind can disrupt the possibility for learning and growth.

How can we foster constructive conversations about helping in organisations and create a communication climate where it is normal to seek, provide, and be grateful for help? We know from research that helping and prosocial behaviour more generally is contagious (Grant and Shandell

2022). When people receive help, they tend to pay it forward and become more helpful themselves. If we want to lower the threshold for asking for help and admitting shortcomings, blind spots, and dependencies on other people's efforts and skills, then we can begin by offering personal examples. Personal narratives about needing and seeking help can inspire others to come forward with similar experiences.

The purpose of this chapter has been to highlight how the flow of helping initiatives at work depends on a communication climate where people speak openly and freely about help. Silence mysteries occur when people who need help or who observe a colleague needing help nevertheless remain wordless and passive. From research, we have learned that embarrassment and fear of being seen as dependent, weak, powerless, and not so creative after all can inhibit calls for help. People who break the silence and take initiatives to express both their need for help and their willingness to help others can set in motion positive spirals of helpfulness, collaboration, and reciprocity. However, in some cases, silence can be the most constructive option because it opens experiences to learn and achieve mastery.

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PART II



CHAPTER 7

Friendly Friction

Abstract This chapter introduces friendly friction as the first of five qualities that can be found in well-functioning communication climates. To establish friendly friction in an organisation, it is necessary to avoid the poles of having unfriendly friction and friendliness without friction. Social contagion poses an obstacle to creating a productive communication climate in that unfriendly friction encountered on social media or within an organisation can spread. Experiences of friendliness without friction can also create more of the same. However, social contagion can also help to establish and maintain friendly friction as a quality in the workplace through exposure to practices where people provide that kind of input to each other.

Keywords Friendly friction • Dissent • Bystander effect • Psychological safety

Over the past 12 years, I have published around 70 short reflection pieces on leadership in a Norwegian business newspaper. In a part of this period, I had a dedicated colleague in the communications department at my school who provided input to the texts. When deadline approached, I sent him a first draft. He would read it and provide suggestions for improvements. The process was mostly digital. I sent an email with the draft, and

when his work with it was finished, he sent a version with his comments and suggestions through the same channel.

Sometimes my colleague preferred to give the feedback face-to-face. I could see him coming down the corridor, heading for my door, and immediately understood that he had some serious issues to address. He had a principle of never using digital media when delivering particularly sharp and potentially hurtful criticism. If he wanted to tell me that this draft was weak and built on a dubious idea, for these concrete reasons, he would always deliver the message personally. He placed himself in a position where he could check out my responses and explain his criticism in further detail. Through this approach, he also gave me an opportunity to explain and defend the argumentation in the draft. Perhaps he had overlooked or misunderstood something. We could have a calm and friendly conversation about it.

What my colleague provided is a miniature example of friendly friction. It is a precious gift from one person to another. People often have their attention elsewhere and are too busy to deliver high-quality suggestions about an idea or a plan. My colleague was exceptional in this respect. He provided detailed and constructive input, time and again, not just to me but also to other colleagues. We were very fortunate to have a colleague whom we could trust to provide honest and specific feedback on our ideas. He was not part of the academic staff, so in terms of hierarchy in the organisation, he was of lower rank than the professors and other researchers he supervised in this manner. Hierarchies can weaken psychological safety and create hesitation about criticising people higher up. In this case, the fact he was a communication advisor and the recipients of his feedback were professors did not stop our colleague from challenging our ideas. He took our writing seriously, read it carefully, and gave it proper professional attention before responding with suggestions. Turning up at my door when his input was particularly critical indicated that both the friendliness and the friction were in place.

In other organisational contexts, friendly friction can be required to sharpen and improve plans and strategies, as well as to make initiatives more comprehensive. The context can be much more complex than giving and receiving input about a newspaper article. The pattern can still be the same. Colleagues can engage in a process of trying to understand the thoughts and ideas that have been set in motion, finding strengths and weaknesses in them, and conveying their observations back to the initiator in a friendly manner.

Friendly friction is the first of five qualities I will present as parts of a well-functioning communication climate. I will dedicate one chapter to each of these qualities:

- Friendly friction
- Tolerance for false alarms
- Psychological safety
- Scope for agency
- Pushing plus buttons

These are overlapping qualities that support each other, rather than five separate and distinct aspects of a communication climate. I have noticed them as patterns in the visits I have made to various organisations over the last two decades, in the capacity as facilitator of workshops and participant in conversations about how people communicate and collaborate at work.

The five qualities taken together can serve as a foundation for coping with the communication challenges described in Part 1 of this book. We saw that (a) organisations can face critical quality moments, situations where the next thing to happen will determine the further development of a project or other activity that takes place within the organisation. Will anyone take the initiative to voice their concern about the current course of events? If no one speaks up, then the chance to correct or revise the development may be lost. Furthermore, (b) bystander effects can increase passivity and cause witnesses to remain silent, even when they have an opportunity to stop a negative causal sequence of events or create a positive one. We also noted that (c) inattentional blindness, or our inability to see phenomena that are straight in front of our eyes, might lead us to miss important aspects of the situations we are facing. We only see the aspects that we give active and deliberate attention to and can be blind to ethical and other important aspects of what others or we are doing. Finally, (d) the scope of action for seeking and providing help in work settings can be under threat from systems of holding back. In a group setting, individual members can mistakenly assume about each other that they are not interested in helping, and thus the positive dance of reciprocity never gets underway.

In my studies of how people communicate in organisations, I have looked for patterns in how they more or less consciously counter these obstacles to collaboration. I have been inspired by the tradition of Positive Organisational Scholarship (Cameron and Dutton 2003) which has

initiated a broad range of studies of human strengths and flourishing in organisations. When exploring communication climates in organisations, I have tried to align my own approach with this emerging research tradition, and the ways in which it seeks to understand processes that mobilise individual and organisational resources, and create upward spirals in human systems (Cameron and Spreitzer 2012). In workshops and conversations within organisations, I have come equipped with the question “When is the communication climate in your organisation at its best?” and sought narratives and examples from participants. When people inquire about examples from my own organisation, I often share the story from the opening of this chapter. It helps them to search their own memories for incidents where they have experienced support and friendly friction at work. I have also learned from supervising executive students who have explored similar positive patterns in organisations.

Friendly friction is the first quality to dwell on here. The opening personal example illustrated what it can be. In other organisational contexts, the stakes can be higher. The need for attentive and concrete feedback delivered in a friendly manner can be more urgent. This may be a critical phase in the planning or execution of a major project. The decisions taken today will be crucial to the project’s success. If the criticism is voiced in a hostile and unfriendly tone, the receiver can be less inclined to listen and take it seriously. The other extreme is one where the tone is very friendly, but the content is superficial and hardly offers anything useful for improving an idea. This contribution offers no real friction.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss has inspired the formulation of the concept of friendly friction. In his book *Livsfilosofi* (Philosophy of Life; (Næss 1999), he explored the roles of reason and emotion in human relations, claiming that the emotional aspects of being together are often undervalued at the expense of logic and reasoning. He invited people to reflect on the patterns of their lives, reconsider their habits, and contemplate alternative ways of prioritising and living. One sentence stands out as a pointer to friendly friction as an important quality in a communication climate:

- In an atmosphere of friendliness, we can take lot from others.

I take this sentence to mean that we are particularly receptive to criticism when we sense that those who are delivering it are good willed and want to help us to realise the flaws in the idea we have put forward. We listen more attentively. The friendly atmosphere means that we can trust the critics and leave aside the worry that they might want to hurt us. Elster

(2015) claimed that when we trust someone, we meet that person with our guard down. This is what happens in a friendly atmosphere. We can lower our guard, concentrate on the meaning of what people are saying to us, and try to put the friction to constructive use. We would have no need to spend resources on defence or control, as we would in the absence of trust.

The friction part of the concept is inspired by a definition of generative resistance, a quality Carlsen et al. (2012) identified as central to creativity and idea work. These researchers highlighted the importance of “acknowledging doubt, friction, and criticism, not as noise to be avoided, but as levers with which to question the given and enhance imagination in everyday work.” In physics, friction is defined as the resistance to motion between bodies in contact. When there is little or no friction, an object can move quickly down a slope. A similar development can occur when an idea or a proposal receives minimal friction. It can be difficult to stop once it has accelerated up to a certain speed. Friction means that we slow down, take a critical look at the idea at hand, and consider whether it is good enough already or whether it should be revised or even discarded.

Friendly friction is situated between two poles that are detrimental to a constructive communication climate. In processes of evaluating ideas and activities, organisations should avoid

- unfriendly friction
- friendliness without friction.

Unfriendly friction is rife in social media, and it can spill over into communication in the workplace. On platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, the tone is often harsh and aggressive when political and societal topics are under debate. Participants tend to attack each other with confrontational rhetoric. Exchanges about sensitive topics such as gender, racism, health, and climate seem to bring out the worst in people. Many are offended and hurt by the arguments from opponents, perhaps more due to the tone of voice than the content. In an atmosphere of unfriendliness, we can take very little from others.

A previous chapter brought attention to how behaviours and attitudes are contagious, as Wilson and Kelling (1982), Wilson (2011), Grant and Shandell (2022), and others have documented. Prosocial behaviour tends to grow and spread when people benefit from it or witness it. Social contagion is not limited to positive behaviours. Even undesirable ways of communicating and acting can spread when people are exposed to them. Social media behaviours may affect organisational life in general, and

particularly the communication climate. Can unfriendly friction spill over from social media and into the workplace? Facebook and Twitter debates may take place outside working hours, but it is likely that the behaviours we engage in there can rub off on how we communicate at work. One study indicated that anyone can become a troll, in the sense that exposure to other people's aggressive communication can shape the way we communicate and make us less considerate and respectful (Cheng et al. 2017). Research has also shown that social media use can trigger moral disengagement, leading to a lower threshold for engaging in bullying (Runions and Bak 2015).

Unfriendly friction would be an unwanted element in a communication climate. The same holds for the opposite state where there is friendliness but no friction. People do not listen attentively to each other's ideas, and they half-heartedly agree with anything a colleague puts forward. We may even silently think to ourselves that something is not quite right about an idea but refrain from speaking up about it. There can be a range of reasons for the silence. For example, I may be too busy with other issues to engage fully with your ideas. Friendliness can be in place, and the lack of friction can stem from a misguided idea that if I start a critical discussion, then it will destroy the nice and friendly atmosphere we have established between us.

Friendliness, then, can be the source of a particular kind of silence mystery. You were present when a friend embarked on a dubious journey of exploration, based on a flawed assumption, and chose not to intervene. Why? One reason can be that you value the friendly atmosphere you have and you did not want to destroy it.

One executive student thesis that I supervised explored a work environment in a healthcare institution, guided by the question of whether friendliness impeded critical exchanges and friction. Three students interviewed their colleagues in the institution about this issue and invited them to share experiences and thoughts. The institution was in a small community, and the colleagues frequently spent time together outside work. The inquiry strengthened the hypothesis that the employees in this institution found it difficult to establish a reasonable balance between friendliness and friction. The interviewees described a tendency to hold back and choose a nonconfrontational approach to colleagues who were also friends outside work. They had developed a tolerance of bad habits and shortcuts at work because those who manifested them were friends. Voicing disagreement or criticism was seen as an initiative that would negatively affect the friendly atmosphere. These concrete findings led to a reorientation in the workplace. Introducing friendly friction among colleagues was identified as a

common challenge and an achievable goal that would improve collaboration in the institution.

We have seen that social contagion can impede a communication climate by leading to a spread of unfriendly friction. It is likely that even friendliness without friction can gain further ground when people are exposed to it. We get more of the social behaviours that we observe around us. Therein we can also find encouragement for efforts to foster friendly friction in a group or organisation. That development can also gain speed through social contagion. When people are exposed to examples of how one can combine friendliness with criticism and disagreement, they can be inspired to make similar efforts themselves. These are processes where we are likely to encounter systems of holding back, as described by Hämäläinen and Saarinen (2006). Friendly friction cannot be established permanently and then be left alone. It needs constant care and maintenance to remain in place as a quality in how people share ideas and challenge each other during work processes. Negative spirals of holding back can make us prioritise uncommitted and bland friendliness at work over the more demanding relation that crucially includes friction.

It is likely that the bystander effect can weaken friendly friction. If I ask a group of friends for input about a specific idea or plan, and everyone in the group knows that I have made the same request to all of them, each of them can assume that they do not really need to get deeply involved. Others may have more time and energy now to give Øyvind the friendly friction he requires. I can avoid this effect by addressing everyone in the group separately and ask for friendly friction, without revealing that the others have received a similar request for help.

This chapter has presented the first of five qualities that characterises the communication climate in organisations when it is at its best. Friendly friction is situated between the poles of unfriendly friction and friendliness without friction. Decision-makers in organisations depend on friction and dissent when they contemplate alternative ways forward. If they sense that the feedback comes from someone who wants the best for them, and the delivery happens in a friendly atmosphere, they are more likely to listen attentively and learn from what they hear. The following chapters will introduce further qualities and will add colour to the understanding of what it means to have friendly friction between colleagues.

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Tolerance for False Alarms

Abstract This chapter introduces the second of five qualities inherent in well-functioning and productive communication climates: tolerance for false alarms. It draws a distinction between active and passive speech mistakes, or between saying something that should have remained unsaid and refraining from saying something that should have been said. In organisations, fear of sounding a false alarm can cause people to remain silent in situations where voicing a concern could make a positive difference. A tolerance for false alarms at work can create a platform for constructive initiatives in critical quality moments.

Keywords Inattention blindness • Communication climate • Active speech mistake • Passive speech mistake • Omission bias • Hint and hope

The fireguard notices smoke rising above the forest some kilometres in the distance. The smoke could be coming from a campfire someone has started and has full control over, or it could be the beginning of a forest fire. In these doubtful situations, the fireguard hits the alarm button every time. It is more acceptable to send a fire truck to a situation that turns out not to be an emergency than to refrain from sending one to what can otherwise develop into a full-blown forest fire. If the fire truck reaches the source of the smoke in the forest and it turns out to be a campfire, it

means this time it was a false alarm. In hindsight and objectively speaking, it was unnecessary and wrong to sound the alarm and spend resources on bringing the fire truck and the team out there. However, the fire department has a high tolerance for such mistakes. It is better to make the active mistake of sounding the alarm when there is no fire, than to make the passive mistake of not sounding the alarm when there is a fire (Kvalnes 2022).

The difference between active and passive mistakes is highly relevant in organisations (Kvalnes 2017). A fire department can identify possible mistakes of this kind in advance and decide on the type of tolerance there should be for each of them. Humans are fallible beings; therefore, operating with a zero-tolerance policy for mistakes makes little sense. Instead, the organisation can have a conversation about tolerance levels and priorities.

- A bank employee can doubt whether the customer can handle the economic burden of a loan. Granting a loan to someone who is unable to pay the instalments is an active mistake, while not granting a loan to someone who would have been able to pay the instalments is a passive mistake. For what type of mistake will the bank management have the most tolerance? For what type of mistake are the customers and society best served with tolerance?
- During the year, the hospital receives, for example, 100 patients with symptoms indicating appendicitis. The doctors must decide whether to operate. Operating on someone who turns out not to have appendicitis is an active mistake, while sending home and not operating on someone who has appendicitis is a passive mistake. What type of mistake should the hospital, the patients, and society tolerate?
- The residents at the nursing home have expressed a wish for more activities and excursions. They do not want to sit passively on the sofa at the home all day. A higher risk of harm comes with increased activity. Taking a resident on a trip that ends with a fall and a femoral neck fracture would be an active mistake. It would be a passive mistake to keep the residents locked inside the nursing home, not heeding their wish to live more life. What kind of mistake should be most tolerated among residents, their families, employees at the home, the authorities, and the public?

I took these examples from my Norwegian book on communication climate (Kvalnes 2022). These types of examples can help to explore

patterns in the attitudes towards mistakes. In many contexts, a fear of making active mistakes can lead to passive mistakes. The underlying assumption is that if someone does nothing, then at least they are not committing a mistake. Passivity should protect us against criticism and blame. This is a mistaken assumption because doing nothing can be a serious passive mistake.

The second quality of a well-functioning communication climate to which I will draw attention is that of tolerating that people speak up, even if they are sounding a false alarm. In line with the distinction between active and passive mistakes, there are two types of speech mistakes.

- Active speech mistakes: To say something that should have remained unsaid.
- Passive speech mistakes: To refrain from saying something that should have been said.

In critical quality moments, situations where the next thing to happen will determine whether things go well, the people present can have doubts about their interpretation of the facts they face. It looks like a dangerous situation, or one where the group or organisation is about to proceed with a bad idea, so they can sense the right thing to do is to speak up. However, the fear of sounding a false alarm can cause them to remain silent. It would be embarrassing if they voiced their concern, and it turned out that they had overlooked something important. Things were under control and moving in the right direction after all. Here, the faulty assumption comes up that if I refrain from speaking, at least I am not making a mistake. There can be passive mistakes, and more precisely in the context of the workplace communication climate, passive speech mistakes.

We have seen that inattentional blindness can occur in organisations (Simons and Chabris 1999; Mack 2003; Kreitz et al. 2016). People can be unaware of important aspects of their behaviour, even though they are obvious to others watching. People tend to see only the aspects to which they specifically attend, and that effort of attention can make other aspects invisible. In situations where someone senses that colleagues are blind to what is going on, a verbal intervention can serve to open their eyes. However, this initiative might start from a misreading of the situation. Voicing that particular concern can result in being an active speech mistake. An organisation can value and tolerate such initiatives because people must speak up when they perceive they have something important to

convey to colleagues. If the organisation sanctions such behaviours, it is likely to lead to increased passive speech mistakes. People will hesitate to speak up because they are unsure about their interpretation of events and they remember the response the last time someone uttered concerns and they turned out to be wrong.

Passive speech mistakes can have negative consequences. Imagine a scenario where a nurse does not speak up about a doctor's mistake in the operating room. By voicing her observation, she can prevent serious harm to the patient. One reason for her silence can be that she is a junior person, reluctant to interfere in the work of a senior and higher ranked professional. There may be a low tolerance for active speech mistakes in place. If she speaks up and it turns out that she has misunderstood the situation, she can be in trouble. The norm in this organisation could be that a person should not question authority. Even if what the senior person was doing looked odd and even dangerous, a junior person is not supposed to intervene.

A psychological phenomenon called omission bias can explain why the nurse is silent. Omission bias is a greater willingness to accept harms from omission than harms from action (Baron and Ritov 2004). Parents are reluctant to vaccinate a child when the vaccination can cause death, even when it is much less likely than a death from the illness the vaccine prevents (Ritov and Baron 1990). Omission bias gives cause for concern even in a communication climate context because it may strengthen the tendency to remain silent and do nothing, rather than intervening to prevent harm. A bias in favour of omission can lead a person to say nothing on the assumption that the harm they thereby fail to prevent is not as serious as the harm caused through an activity. The nurse may hold back even though she is in a position to prevent harm, thinking that at least she is not committing the infinitely more serious act of inflicting harm. Omission bias can be part of a mindset where an organisation tolerates passive speech mistakes.

If employees sense that it is risky to challenge leaders and colleagues at work and the tolerance for false alarms is low, it can result in the emergence of a communication strategy called hint and hope. Instead of saying things straight, people hint in the hope that it will be sufficient to make the recipients aware of the problem. As noted in Chap. 2, hint and hope was first detected and described in aviation (Gordon et al. 2012; Kvalnes 2017). Copilots would typically hesitate to bother the more experienced

pilots with their concerns. They would choose a more indirect approach, hinting that the signal to proceed to the runway had not yet been given in the hope that it would be sufficient to alert the pilot of a possible mistake. Weick (1990) described how hint and hope was a feature in the events leading up to the worst disaster in aviation history, when two Boeing 747 planes crashed on the runway at Tenerife airport on 27 March 1977. In that crash, 583 people died, which apparently could have been avoided if the people who had sensed that clearance to take one of the planes onto the runway had not been given had been more direct in their communication with the pilot. Hint and hope is a communication strategy that provides the messenger with an opportunity to retreat if it turns out that the recipient be in control of the situation. Systematic work to develop a better communication climate in aviation has included efforts to remove the hint and hope strategy. These efforts appear to have been successful. Hint and hope can still occur in work environments where people are afraid of making active speech mistakes by addressing issues that those responsible turn out to be aware of, despite appearances to the contrary. Aviation has developed a tolerance for false alarms, and thus made it safer to travel by air.

Recipients of false alarms have a choice in how to respond. When it becomes clear that a newcomer in the organisation made an active speech mistake, sounding the alarm when in fact there was no need to will test the leaders and more experienced colleagues' patience. For them, it can seem obvious that things were under control, that the medicine use was correct or that the clearance signal had come from the flight traffic controller. The inexperienced newcomer was nervous and voiced a concern when in fact there was no need. In such circumstances, the veterans' responses in the work environment can significantly affect whether this and other newcomers will ever sound the alarm again. Ridicule, sarcasm, and anger are expressions of intolerance for false alarms, and they clearly indicate that initiatives to express a concern are not welcomed in this workplace.

Tolerance for false alarms can be a quality that leaders systematically try to integrate in a work environment. It can be high on the agenda in operative organisational settings such as healthcare, policing, industry, and aviation, where it is particularly important with interventions in critical quality moments. Some of these organisations may go further than advocating mere tolerance. Verbal initiatives that turn out to be false alarms can be celebrated and encouraged. It is as if the organisation is saying, "This is how we want you to respond when you sense that something

is wrong, even if you misread the situation on this occasion. Please do the same the next time you are in doubt about the safety of the operation you are witnessing.”

Before closing, it is worth noting one possible misgiving about a tolerance for false alarms. An encouragement to speak up could lead to a cacophony of voices. If everyone takes up the invitation to use their voices at the same time, the organisation cannot discern the details of what anyone is saying. At times, there can be too much talk in a workplace, and silence can be a more constructive option, as Edmondson and Besieux (2021) pointed out in their Productive Conversation Matrix. This is a valid point, but it does not reduce the importance of establishing and maintaining a tolerance for false alarms. An encouragement to speak up even when a person has doubts and might be wrong does not imply that everyone should speak up simultaneously or have a shouting match. Tolerance for false alarms is not a wholesale tolerance for constant verbal activity.

This chapter aimed to introduce the second of five qualities present in well-functioning communication climates. The previous chapter launched friendly friction as a quality that enhances collaboration and idea work. Here, a tolerance for false alarms, or what can more precisely be described as a tolerance for active speech mistakes, can loosen individuals' tongues who sense they have something important to say but may hesitate because there is a risk they have misunderstood the situation. If they fear that the recipients will respond negatively to their initiative, they are likely to remain silent.

When someone in an organisation has stepped forward and voiced a concern that turns out to build on a misunderstanding of events, that person will become the focal point afterwards. What happens next? How do employees cope with false alarms in this organisation? This person has made an active speech mistake, and then the decisive moment arrives regarding the level of tolerance for such mistakes among the leadership and other colleagues. If the person encounters criticism and reprimands for voicing the concern, it can create an impression that this is an organisation where people should only speak up when they are 100% certain about the validity of their claims. However, if the response is understanding and even full of gratitude, it can mobilise further productive initiatives when people have a hunch that something is not quite right with this activity, idea, or plan for moving forward.

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Psychological Safety

Abstract Research on organisational life widely uses the concept of psychological safety to describe the circumstances under which people sense they can take interpersonal risks and challenge assumptions and beliefs in the group to which they belong. Here, I introduce it to describe one of the five qualities found in well-functioning communication climates. High levels of psychological safety indicate that people can express their disagreement with other group members without fear of repercussions. Individuals may have different perceptions of the psychological safety in the group, and some group members may act and speak in ways that weaken other members' safety.

Keywords Psychological safety • Communication climate • Trust • Workplace collaboration • Friendly friction

Organisations depend on their employees to contribute to the continuous improvement of processes and practices by providing friction, voicing and opposing new ideas, and trying out novel ways of doing things. These activities could benefit the organisation and other stakeholders, but they also come with a risk for the individuals who undertake them. To challenge and criticise established practices can result in being a bad career move because it can put the individual in a negative light among those who make decisions about permanent employment and promotions.

Psychological safety has been identified as a counterweight to a fear of repercussions for speaking up and voicing one's concerns in the workplace. It builds on the works of Schein and Bennis (1965) on how individuals can feel safe and confident in managing change. Kahn (1990), Edmondson (1999) and others' subsequent contributions have placed psychological safety at the centre of attention in studies of workplace collaboration. Newman et al. (2017) provided a comprehensive systematic review of these contributions, outlining how research has identified antecedents and benefits of psychological safety in the workplace.

Psychological safety addresses people's individual and shared perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in a group or team (Edmondson 1999). Here, I will present it as one of the five qualities inherent in well-functioning communication climates. Previous chapters have introduced friendly friction and tolerance from false alarms as two such qualities. Psychological safety is the third quality to which I will draw attention. It is present when there is a shared belief that people will not be rejected, reprimanded, or punished for being themselves and saying what they think, even when it goes against the beliefs of the majority in the group (Edmondson 1999).

Four of the examples from previous chapters can illustrate the presence and benefits of psychological safety in a workplace.

- From Chap. 1: The junior doctor Ida experienced weaknesses in the routines when patients were moved from the surgical unit to the medical unit at the hospital. It would have been an interpersonal risk to speak up, that is, a test of how receptive the group she belonged to would be to her critical comments. She decided to take the risk and suggest improvements to the current practices and she received praise for the effort.
- From Chap. 2: The substitute in the match between Norway and Brazil sensed that the head coach was about to make the wrong substitution and intervened by voicing his belief about what would be a better tactical move. He publicly corrected the head coach and risked becoming unpopular in the eyes of both the coaching team and his teammates. His intervention turned out to be crucial for the match's positive outcome, and the head coach gave him public credit for having taken the initiative.
- From Chap. 2: An engineering company was about to move forward with the drawings and specifications for a bridge leading traffic over

a wide river. The group of engineers studied the details one final time before handing the data over to the production unit, and most of them were satisfied with what they saw. However, one newcomer in the group noticed a detail that made the construction far weaker than it should be. When she spoke up and drew attention to this weakness, everyone else could see it as well and they halted the procedures to make new calculations and drawings.

- From Chap. 7: A communications advisor provided candid criticism of the first draft of a professor's article, and the effort was acknowledged and appreciated as an example of friendly friction. Even in this situation, there was initial interpersonal risk at play. How would the professor respond to criticism from a non-academic colleague? The advisor received acknowledgement for his effort and was encouraged to do more of the same. This exchange occurred as a normal procedure in a work environment consisting of academic and non-academic professionals.

The final example illustrates the connection between two of the qualities present in a constructive communication climate. Psychological safety can serve as a foundation for friendly friction. When people sense that it is safe to take the interpersonal risk of challenging an idea or a suggestion at work, they can more readily engage in well-intentioned criticism. Experiencing friendly friction at work can also strengthen the psychological safety. When newcomers enter the organisation and witness a friendly atmosphere for critical exchanges, it can mobilise them to become involved and to provide honest feedback in interactions with their new colleagues.

One common feature in the four examples above is that the verbal initiatives are taken in a context where there is organisational hierarchy. The person speaking up addresses an issue with someone with a higher status and position in the workplace. Hierarchy can pose an obstacle to psychological safety. The interpersonal risk of speaking up can feel more acute when the recipients are in higher positions than those who are contemplating a verbal initiative. Research has shown that an effective way to create psychological safety is to neutralise the hierarchical dimension (Nembhard and Edmondson 2006). Leaders and seniors can do so by admitting mistakes and seeking help from colleagues. They can also do this by valuing and appreciating the initiatives from juniors and other lower-status people, as was done in the illustrations from previous chapters.

Edmondson emphasised the difference between psychological safety and trust. The former occurs on a group level, while the latter is a feature of the relation between two people (Edmondson 2018). In organisational settings, trust is present when one person assumes that another person has the required ability, benevolence, and integrity to perform a particular task as agreed (Mayer et al. 1995). Trust can thus also be relevant in a communication climate setting when one person considers whether the recipient of a particular message will have the ability, benevolence, and integrity to respond in a constructive manner. The third example above illustrates that there can be one-on-one situations that can be studied through the lenses of both personal trust and interpersonal safety. The exchange happens between two individuals, but the context is group-level collaboration.

To grasp the elements that constitute psychological safety, it can be helpful to study the seven items in Edmondson's (2018) well-established survey to map the phenomenon. This measure has been developed through rigorous use of scale construction protocols, and a range of studies have proved it reliable (Newman et al. 2017). Participants are invited to express their agreement with these statements, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The list contains reverse statements to motivate participants to think carefully about the content of each item.

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.
2. Members of this team can bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. While working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

Applying these items in a group can provide data to measure the shared beliefs about psychological safety. Each item can also serve as a starting point for reflection within the group about interpersonal risk in voicing a concern or disagreement. In Chap. 5, I showed that the threshold for seeking help from colleagues is a highly relevant aspect of an organisation's communication climate. The fifth item in Edmondson's scale addresses that issue. It is central to measuring psychological safety in a

group and is integral to conversations and reflections about how easy or difficult it is in this group to ask a colleague for help.

Responses to the survey can provide insights about the perceived psychological safety in a group. It can produce an average score for the group, and this provides an indication regarding the shared beliefs about the interpersonal risk of expressing nonconformity and challenging ideas, plans, and practices within the group. However, more interesting and revealing than the average score can be the differences in responses between those who feel the most and those who feel the least safe. How psychologically safe are the least-safe individuals in the group? How do they perceive the risk involved in correcting a senior colleague or superior? These might be more pressing questions to address than finding the general level of safety in the group. Having a high average score for psychological safety can camouflage a considerable communication climate challenge in a group, if it turns out that the least-safe minority perceive that the risk of addressing their concerns is high. In critical quality moments, where they can be in a position to address serious issues and bring attention to mistakes, they are likely to remain silent. Hierarchy's numbing effects can fall out of view if an individual focuses solely on average scores in the survey.

When newcomers face situations where they sense a need to speak up, they may be uncertain about the level of psychological safety in the group. They have not been in the workplace long enough to receive an impression of how leaders and colleagues respond to criticism in this group. If they are given Edmondson's survey, they are not yet in a position to strongly agree or disagree with the items; therefore, they might answer with a three, indicating that they do not really know whether it is safe to take an interpersonal risk in this group, or whether attempting to draw attention to something important will be valued and appreciated.

Empirical studies of psychological safety document various beneficial outcomes of having a communication climate where it feels safe to take an interpersonal risk by expressing disagreement, criticism, or concern. Newman et al. (2017) pointed to several studies that established strong and positive links between psychological safety and various positive organisational outcomes. Psychological safety has been proven to create

- an increase in the reporting of treatment errors;
- more knowledge sharing;

- a greater likelihood of raising disagreement and providing candid feedback;
- more learning from failure;
- better team and individual learning;
- improved performance, innovation, and creativity;
- higher work engagement; and
- higher organisational commitment.

Based on these findings, leaders and other decision-makers have strong reasons to design work environments that enhance and stimulate psychological safety. According to research in this field, they can do so by reducing and neutralising hierarchy, and more generally through supportive and inclusive leadership practices (Newman et al. 2017). For leaders, it involves finding constructive ways to cope with what I called earlier in this book the critical quality moments, both before and after they occur. Practicing a tolerance for false alarms belongs in this framework.

Psychological safety has received widespread recognition as a crucial quality to grow and maintain in an organisation. I have suggested that it is one of five qualities that characterise well-functioning communication climates. However, it is also worth reflecting on whether it can have negative outcomes, and the extent to which there can be too much of it. In line with the Aristotelian concept of the golden mean, I can further explore how safety can reach a tipping point where it becomes an obstacle to constructive conversations at work, rather than an enabling factor. Aristotle suggested that precious human virtues and qualities could be found on the golden mean between opposites or extremes. Courage is situated between cowardice and foolhardiness. Honesty can be placed on the golden mean between being dishonest and being uncritically open about everything. This way of thinking is an alternative to the common practice of operating with concept pairs like honest–dishonest, fair–unfair, helpful–unhelpful, safe–unsafe, and so on. Aristotle’s view was that any human virtue or quality can be exaggerated and taken too far, resulting in negative activity. Can this be the case with psychological safety?

Observations from academic work environments, where senior researchers and teachers tend to dominate and express themselves in a manner that signals a high level of psychological safety, motivates my reflection on this question. They behave from an assumption that it is safe for them to engage in interpersonal risk taking: no repercussions or punishment will come their way, no matter what they say and how they say it. The safety

they experience links to a sense of being protected against sanctions. Even if they go a bit too far and use strong language to characterise a colleague or a student, no one will criticise them. In a university department, I witnessed a senior professor turning to another senior professor and called him a “shitbag.” It turned out that the angry professor disagreed on a decision his colleague had recently voted for in a committee. He started the conversation in this aggressive manner, knowing that he could do that without fear of repercussions. His senior status protected him against negative consequences. I have been wondering if this is an example of someone being too psychologically safe. If people sense they can say absolutely anything without repercussions, it can create drastic and unwanted results such as this.

In other contexts, discussions of risk and safety involve analysing levels of protection. Insurance companies are wary of providing their customers with so much protection that they start to behave recklessly. Moral hazard is the term used for situations where decision-makers sense they are insulated from the negative consequences of their actions (Pauly 1968; Rowell and Connelly 2012). Perhaps there can be moral hazard dimensions to psychological safety in the workplace as well. Leaders should be wary of providing employees (e.g., seniors, high-status people) with so much protection that they start to behave hazardously towards their colleagues. If decision-makers are too safe and they experience that no matter how they express themselves at work, they will avoid repercussions, it opens for misbehaviour and reckless communication.

One aspect of psychological safety that the literature has highlighted is that of being free to be oneself. One of the beliefs Edmondson (1999) identifies as an expression of psychological safety is, “In this team you aren’t rejected for being yourself or stating what you think” (p. 11). One informant told Edmondson (2002) about the experience of being psychologically safe at work: “I don’t have to wear a mask in this team—I can be myself” (p. 9). Similar beliefs can create a scope for harsh verbal behaviour from people who see themselves as direct and uncompromising in their word choice. The professor calling a colleague a “shitbag” may do so thinking that this is really him. He does not have to wear a mask and pretend to like his colleague or be polite and respectful in his responses. That is who he really is. An individual sensing that they are free to be themselves in this way indicates that the psychological safety level has reached a tipping point where it leads to questionable behaviour.

Having high levels of psychological safety can cause people to remain silent and inactive at crucial moments in a project or other activities in the workplace. It may create a form of bystander effect where it makes people passive. One executive in a Norwegian organisation told me that they have encountered critical quality moments where employees have been in position to intervene but have failed to do so. The level of psychological safety in the organisation is by all accounts high. The organisation hails people who provide friction and challenge current ideas and plans. There is an eagerness to contribute through disagreement and dissent. The threshold for turning to a colleague for help is low. At crucial moments, people have nevertheless chosen to remain silent. Internal analyses have identified a pattern to explain this silence mystery. Employees appear to have assumed that someone else must have spoken up about this already because what they are seeing is an obvious flaw or mistake, and no one there has any reason to hold back and be silent. There is low interpersonal risk involved in taking an initiative. If an individual does not speak up in this group, it is a missed opportunity to shine and make a contribution that their leader and colleagues will value. If the level of psychological safety had been lower, it may have triggered employees to act under the assumption that someone needs to take responsibility, and in this rather unsafe environment, it is unlikely that anyone has done so yet.

This chapter has launched the third of five qualities of well-functioning communication climates. Psychological safety supplements the qualities identified in the previous chapters. I have shown that friendly friction and tolerance for false alarms tend to be present in workplaces where people communicate constructively and collaborate well. The same holds for psychological safety, a belief that in this group, it is safe to speak up about one's concerns and to address critical issues. When people have a sense that their initiatives will be valued even when they challenge the common beliefs and assumptions in the group, they are more likely to contribute actively to collaborative efforts.

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Scope for Agency

Abstract This chapter presents scope for agency as the fourth of five qualities that characterises well-functioning communication climates. Human agency engages with the past, responds to the present, and is directed towards the future. When individuals face situations where a verbal initiative can make a positive difference, their agency is formed by routines and scripts developed in the past and their plans, desires, and wishes for the future. Roald Nygård's distinction between agent and pawn helps to clarify how self-understanding among group members can affect their decision-making and behaviour in critical quality moments. Scope for agency means that group members can provide constructive verbal responses to events that deviate from established routines and scripts.

Keywords Agency • Agent–pawn • Locus of control • Attribution theory • Communication climate

The Norwegian motivation researcher Roald Nygård (2007) introduced the distinction within human self-understanding between agent and pawn. Agents see themselves as inner-directed, free, self-determining beings who are responsible for their actions, while pawns perceive themselves as outer-directed beings who are pushed around by forces over which they have little or no control, and thus do not see themselves as responsible for what they do or fail to do (Nygård and Kunszenti 1999; Nygård 2007). The

agent–pawn distinction has not been widely used in research, but I have found it useful in reflecting on agency and responsibility with practitioners in organisations. This distinction can help when exploring the roles and responsibilities people take on in their work environments. In this chapter, I will present scope for agency as the fourth quality present in a well-functioning communication climate. There is scope for agency in a group when the members see themselves as agents, and they sense that they have the freedom and the responsibility to take initiatives in work processes.

Nygård outlines how people reveal their self-understanding in what they say about their behaviour. “I did not get time to do it” is a typical pawn expression. It indicates that it was not up to the individual to prioritise a particular matter, and it creates an impression that time is something an external time-provider hands out. In similar circumstances, an agent will say, “I did not set aside time to do it,” and thus, takes responsibility for not putting the matter higher on the agenda. Similarly, a pawn might say, “She irritates me,” while the alternative agentic expression would be, “I allow her to irritate me.”

Individuals can switch between seeing themselves as agents and pawns in their work environments. It may depend on the circumstances, and the reality may be that external forces do set limitations to what an individual can do within this group or organisation. The actual scope for agency at work can differ from one set of circumstances to another. Agent and pawn perspectives are discussed in attribution theory, which studies the beliefs and assumptions people have about why they behave in the way they do and their part in bringing about particular outcomes (Kelley and Michela 1980). Self-determination theory has brought attention to the importance of autonomy for motivation at work (Deci and Ryan 2012). Research on internal and external locus of control also explores people’s beliefs about their influence on and responsibility for what they do and the consequences of their actions (Spector 1982). These theories can explain how outcomes colour people’s evaluations of their behaviour. A Norwegian football coach tends to speak about his contribution to the team’s performance in agentic terms when they win and in pawn terms when they lose. After his team had won a cup final, he described his input as, “world-class coaching,” but after losses, he tends to blame the referee, the height of the grass on the playing field, or the lack of effort from his players.

Human agency can be engaged with the past, responsive to the present, and directed towards the future. In line with Emirbayer and Mische (1998), it can be understood as an intrinsically social and relational

phenomenon. Agency takes place in social contexts and in relationships between people. It is oriented from habits and routines established in the past, partly from situated concerns in the present and partly from future-oriented desires, wishes, strategies, and plans. These temporal orientations overlap, and every new moment constitutes a dynamic present placed between a past and a future.

To illustrate the significance of the agent–pawn distinction in understanding agency in relation to communication climate, I want to revisit an example from Chap. 2. A critical quality moment occurred in a choir when they were on the podium, ready to perform Mozart’s *Requiem*. The conductor entered the stage, received applause from the audience, and turned to the choir to start the performance. He proceeded by giving the singers the tone from which they were supposed to start. Unease spread among the singers because they could immediately sense that this was the wrong tone. It was too deep. If they followed the instructions from the conductor, this would become a bad performance. What happened next would determine the outcome. Would any of the singers take an initiative to alert the conductor to his mistake?

If the choir was a group consisting of pawns, it would follow orders and do what it was told. They would sense that there was no scope for agency in this situation. When you are a singer in this choir, you follow orders from the conductor. He makes the decisions. As a member of this group, it is not your responsibility to intervene and challenge decisions. Who are you, a mere singer, to question the instructions from an experienced conductor? In this choir, you simply do what you are told, even if you have reasons to believe that it will lead to a negative outcome in the shape of a musical crisis.

Agency takes place in the present and the past forms it through habit and repetition. The conductor and the singers had practiced together for a long time and had been able to establish a schema for how to sing *Requiem* together as one unit. A critical quality moment occurred when the conductor unwittingly departed from the pattern that had been created through past repetitive interactions. What now? In some cases, a collective or group may also have established scripts and patterns of action for addressing disruptive events such as these. Aviation personnel practice responding to dramatic events, including ones where the pilot starts to behave irrationally, and they have agreed upon ways to act in such situations (Gordon et al. 2012). One pilot explained that the instruction is clear if he starts to act abnormally at work. The crew should then take over

command and set him aside. There is an agreed-upon script for those occasions. Without such a script, group members can experience insecurity and confusion. The singers in the choir could respond to the lack of an agreed way to act in such unforeseen circumstances by entering pawn mode, doing what the conductor instructs them to do, despite sensing that it would lead to a terrible musical performance.

Another possibility is that there are one or more agents among the singers, individuals who are willing to use their imagination and take an initiative when something is about to go wrong. Their self-understanding indicates they have the scope to question and correct the conductor's instruction. They can distance themselves from the schemas, habits, and traditions that are important but that also constrain social interaction. Their agency is future oriented and it exemplifies the projective dimension of human agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). When the conductor gives the wrong tone to the choir, it sets in motion a chain of events that can lead to a painful near future, unless one or more singers act(s) on a desire, wish, or aspiration to deliver beautiful music to the audience in the concert hall. Singers with an agentic orientation can consider it their responsibility to save the choir and the conductor from embarrassment, and to create a more fulfilling aesthetic experience for the listeners. The performance of Mozart's *Requiem* is a collaborative effort. It is not one individual (the conductor) using the other individuals (the singers) as mere instruments to play with as the conductor pleases. An agent among the singers can exemplify the projective, future-oriented side of agency and try to get the conductor's attention in the seconds before the singing starts, and if that fails, may introduce the right tone from which to start the performance.

I have discussed the example with a musicologist and conductor, and she described it as a musical nightmare, something that should never happen, but may nevertheless occur (Kvalnes 2017). When the conductor provides the wrong tone and it creates unease among the singers, a good conductor will be sensitive to the group's change in atmosphere. Hours of repetition and practice have established the schema for interaction between singers and conductor. They have been rehearsing this composition for a long time, and should be breathing, moving, and singing together as one. On very rare occasions, a conductor provides the wrong tone to the choir, and realises their mistake due to the unusual, nonverbal responses from the singers. They sense that something is wrong and can correct the tone.

The audience may not realise that a minor communication drama has taken place in front of them. If the conductor lacks this sensitivity and fails to pick up the unease, the singers must behave as agents or as pawns. According to the musicologist, there is normally no scope for agency in such a context. As a rule, the singers should be loyal to the conductor and follow their instructions. However, in exceptional cases such as this one, there should be room for some form of intervention to save the day. The choir cannot solely be governed by the habits and routines established in the past but must also be oriented towards the future.

I came across the choir example in a workshop with leaders in an organisation where they wanted to encourage agency and provide scope for employees to intervene in critical quality moments. One of the participating leaders was also a singer in a choir and had recently experienced that the conductor provided the wrong tone at the start of a concert. Unease had spread among the singers, and the conductor did not notice. In this situation, one of the singers, an experienced tenor, had intervened and discreetly introduced the right tone. The other singers followed the new instruction, and the concert ended well. However, in the aftermath, when the choir members met for a short debrief, the conductor had been irritated and angry for the intervention. Apparently, he found it difficult to admit his mistake and that the experienced singer had saved the group from embarrassment. The example served as a vivid reminder of the situations leaders can encounter if they open for agency and intervention. It illustrated that if a leader encourages employees to be agents rather than pawns, it can create situations that expose the leader's limitations, flaws, and weaknesses. The commitment to a program of providing scope for agency is tested when it creates potentially embarrassing moments for the leader.

Taking an initiative when the conductor appears to have given the wrong tone is to take interpersonal risk. It can potentially place you in conflict with the conductor and the other singers, and lead to a dismissal or another form of sanction. The perceived level of psychological safety in the group will thus influence whether anyone will intervene to draw the conductor's attention to the mistake or to correct the tone. The stakes are high, and there can be little tolerance for false alarms. If the same thing has happened before, and someone took an initiative to correct the tone, the singers may consider what happened in the aftermath of that dramatic event. Did the initiator receive praise or criticism for the effort? If the

initiative was appreciated, it is likely to have contributed to a higher level of psychological safety in the group. It can motivate others to do the same on subsequent occasions.

A bystander effect can also inhibit constructive responses in a choir that receives the wrong starting tone from a conductor. The effect of multiple bystanders can be that the singers adopt a pawn mode. As described in Chap. 3, the effect has two main causes. Diffusion of responsibility occurs when many people are present and distribute the responsibility for doing something evenly among them. Each member of the choir may think that they are only one of many people in a position to do something, and thus, consider their individual responsibility to be minimal. Furthermore, the high number of people can create pluralistic ignorance, where those present will doubt their judgement because nobody else appears to question or doubt the instruction they have received. The bystander effect can pull everyone away from seeing themselves as responsible agents and towards a self-understanding where they are powerless pawns.

Scope for agency in a communication climate requires constant maintenance and support in an organisation. It takes effort to establish it initially, and it is likely to be under threat from psychological factors that draw people towards a pawn understanding of themselves. The test of whether this quality is present in a group comes when something unexpected happens. The group has prepared for or rehearsed for this situation. If the members are primarily engaged with the past and the schemas developed there, they will struggle to cope with the present. If they are future oriented, they can mobilise creativity and take on the role of being innovative agents.

To cope with critical quality moments, an organisation or group depends on a communication climate where there is scope for agency. Group members should have freedom to take verbal initiatives to correct the tone or point to weaknesses in plans and ideas. Responsibility comes with this freedom of speech. If a group member spots something out of the ordinary and senses that it will affect the outcome of what the group is trying to achieve together, that member has a responsibility to intervene. The group member can be influenced to become a passive pawn via the bystander effect and they can perceive a lack of psychological safety. In shaping the communication climate, it is important to counter such pacifying tendencies and to encourage people to perceive themselves as agents.

The scope for agency can also include opportunities to provide positive feedback to colleagues and group members who have recently made particularly positive contributions. As noted in Chap. 2, those moments include situations where not only an initiative is needed to stop a negative causal chain to develop further but also where it is possible to energise colleagues by providing praise and acknowledgement for their excellent efforts. The opportunity to do so may come and go rather quickly, and thus, it may require a swift initiative.

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce scope for agency as the fourth quality that can be found in a well-functioning communication climate, supplementing friendly friction, tolerance for false alarms, and psychological safety. When people see themselves and they are treated like agents, they can sense they have a scope for influencing crucial events at work. Their initiatives make a difference, and the organisation or group appreciates them. They also have a responsibility to speak up and act in critical quality moments. It is particularly during and after such moments that people can see whether they understand themselves as agents or pawns. In line with findings in attribution theory, positive outcomes can expect to trigger agentic self-understanding, and negative outcomes can mobilise people to describe their role in events in pawn terms.

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Pushing Plus Buttons

Abstract In a well-functioning communication climate, people are generous in pushing each other's plus buttons. Meaning, they regularly acknowledge and praise each other's efforts and initiatives. Pushing plus buttons is the fifth and final quality I will draw attention to as being inherent in the best communication climates. The concept comes from the Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen, who uses it to describe how people can energise colleagues and collaborators at work by taking time to appreciate truly and explicitly what they do. The opportunity to push a colleague's plus button can appear in an instant and it can be a critical quality moment.

Keywords Appreciation • Praise • Plus buttons • Communication climate

#Råbra is a system for reporting about exceptional efforts in Norwegian hospitals. It was initiated by doctor Marianne Nordhov, who found inspiration from the Learning from Excellence initiative in Britain (Kelly et al. 2016). #Råbra (a Norwegian slang term for "excellence") provides a system where colleagues can report about each other when they have witnessed excellent professional work in their units. These doctors and nurses are used to systematic reporting about harm to patients and mistakes at work. #Råbra creates a balance, in that it opens for reporting even of small wins and positive developments. It is a system that energises hospital

workers and highlights the good they contribute to through their professional efforts. In line with Amabile and Kramer (2011), it ignites joy, engagement, and creativity at work.

I have personal experience in energising effects of receiving generous and precise praise. Some years ago, I wrote a report on the dissertation of a Finnish doctoral candidate in philosophy. The candidate had written a dense and comprehensive scholarly text over several hundred pages. It was hard work to read it and provide precise critical feedback. I attempted to offer friendly friction, combining goodwill and kindly interest with input on strengths and weaknesses in the argumentation. In the report, I listed elements the candidate should improve and revise before submitting the final version of the dissertation. The philosopher Esa Saarinen had requested me to do the report, and some weeks after I had submitted it, he sent me the following message.

Your statement on the candidate's work is the finest I have seen in the category of pre-examiner's reports. It is so nuanced, accurate, sharp, to the point, wise, beautifully written and composed. You truly are a fine mind, scholar and human being. I am proud to be your friend and fellow researcher in the realm of applied philosophy. (E. Saarinen, personal communication, June 1st, 2020)

This was a rather overwhelming show of appreciation. I am not accustomed to receiving such an outpour of praise for my efforts and personality. My initial response was that it was too much, that I did not really deserve this string of compliments. Then I let the message sink in and experienced that the words gave me a jolt of positive energy and made me proud of the work I had done.

Saarinen is not one to hold back when he has something positive and uplifting to say to others. As noted earlier in the book, he and collaborating researchers have argued that groups and individuals tend to be caught up in systems of holding back, where they are reluctant to express positive messages to each other based on the often misplaced assumption that it would not be valued or reciprocated (Hämäläinen and Saarinen 2006; Hämäläinen 2008; Hämäläinen et al. 2013).

The fifth and final quality I will draw attention to as part of a well-functioning communication climate is that people are generous in pushing each other's plus buttons. I learned this concept from Saarinen, who uses it in his teaching to outline countermeasures to tendencies to hold back. He describes how everyone can energise colleagues and collaborators at work by taking time to appreciate truly their efforts. Miracles of

collaboration can occur when group members generously push each other's plus buttons, and thereby mobilise individual and collective resources. The opportunity to push a colleague's plus button can appear in an instant, and it can be a critical quality moment. The time window for doing it may suddenly close; therefore, if you are going to do it, it must be now. Hesitancy can cause you to miss an opportunity to lift the colleague and thereby fuel the collective capacity to move forward and do splendid things together. The #Råbra system described at the beginning of the chapter provides a systematic approach to appreciating other people's work, and lowers the threshold for speaking up to celebrate excellence.

Equipped with the concept of pushing plus buttons, I have started to notice patterns and nuances in how group members express their appreciation of each other's efforts. I have also brought the concept into workshops on communication climate in organisations and invited participants to reflect on their practices and the extent to which it is common to express admiration and appreciation for colleagues' efforts.

Remaining close to my professional life, it is striking to see how researchers and authors, particularly male ones, hesitate to complement each other on work achievements. A standard thing to say to a colleague is, "I have read your recent paper." Nothing more than that. No elaboration on positive aspects of the paper or congratulations on having it published. One could interpret the sentence as a minimalistic form of appreciation. Everyone is busy with important tasks. Taking time to read a colleague's paper shows that you have given it some priority. That is a sign that you take the colleague's work seriously and count them among the people worth reading. However, what you made of the colleague's effort remains silent. This habit of saying nothing more than "I have read your paper" constitutes a kind of silence mystery. Why not be more elaborate and concrete about your impressions of the paper? Why not share your thoughts on its strengths and weaknesses? The author is likely to be curious about what a qualified reader thinks about the arguments and thoughts laid out in the paper.

Inspired by Saarinen's teaching, I have invited participants in workshops to play with numbers when considering a scenario where a group of six people are going to collaborate. Imagine that each of them has a ground level of energy that is set at 1. If they enter the collaborative process while they are at that level, their common energy level is $1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. However, if one of them is down on energy, due to stressful circumstances at work or elsewhere, the numbers look different: $0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 \times 0.8 = 0.26$. Another possibility is that they have a

practice of encouraging each other and providing uplifting input ahead of the collaborative process. They are pushing each other's plus buttons and are thereby elevating each other up from the ground level of 1 to 1.2. The common level will then be $1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2 \times 1.2 = 2.98$, which is about 10 times as high as if they had entered the work process in the stressful mode. This is a playful and unscientific use of numbers, but people recognise that individual and collective energy levels are crucial, and that simple ways to influence them are within grasp. Minimal effort can provide significant fuel to individuals and groups before collaborative work processes.

To push people's plus buttons effectively, an individual needs to identify where they are located. A compliment for an effort that is not close to the heart of what the other person sees as their core strengths may not count as an example. In his teaching, Saarinen explains that he is an enthusiastic driver, and that he can be very proud when he has been able to manoeuvre his car into a narrow parking spot. If a passenger then notices the efforts and says, "Very nice parking manoeuvre, Esa!" it gives him immense and immediate pleasure. This is precisely where one of his plus buttons is situated. Another driver may not place similar pride in being able to park the car in this manner and will not experience the same jolt of energy from receiving the same praise. This person's plus buttons are located elsewhere, and it may take some time to identify them through socialising and working together.

Searching for other people's plus buttons is an activity conducted through trial and error. You try out simple expressions of admiration, praise, and acknowledgement and note what happens. Sometimes the other lights up, indicating that this is where a plus button is situated. Other times, there is no particular response, and you can assume that the other takes no particular pride in being skilled in this concrete activity. No plus button is hidden here. The search is a form of experimentation. One simple experiment Saarinen suggested is to say, "Well done!" to someone who has finished a particular task well. It often happens that people choose to say, "Well done, but..." and then mention something the other could have done in addition to the task. The "but" signals that someone is not fully satisfied with the work laid down thus far. No time to rest on your laurels. However, the "but" also reduces the expression's energising potential. It is possible to make a conscious effort to stop mentioning the extra task that also should have been done. In collaboration with Saarinen and my colleague Arne Carlsen, I have invited executive students to

perform this experiment outside of class. Some of them have returned with astonishing testimonies about the difference it makes to say, “Well done!” without mentioning any extra tasks the other could also have performed. The simple version has a far more uplifting effect on recipients. They can savour the input and gain energy from it. The “but...” is more of a takedown than the students had initially expected.

One reason for being sceptical of a practice of handing out and receiving compliments at work is that it can have manipulative undertones. Research on persuasion techniques has well shown that an appreciative remark increases the likelihood that the recipient will say yes to a request (Cialdini 2006). I once received an email from two of my students. They wrote that I was the ethics guru at the business school and one of the sportiest teachers they had. Then, they wondered if I would be willing to participate in a short film they were going to make. My immediate response was to say yes. Later, I learned that these students had recently taken a course in persuasion and influence and had become familiar with studies documenting that a compliment increases the likelihood that the recipient will say yes to a request. When I confronted students about it, they admitted that this had been their strategy, but added that the compliments were genuine and the procedure therefore ethically justifiable. My reflection afterwards was that the compliments from the students had made me switch from what Kahneman (2013) has labelled System 2 decision-making (a slow, analytical method) to System 1 decision-making (the fast, impulsive, and intuitive way). Normally, when I receive a request from students, I prefer to think carefully about the consequences and the precedence I would set by saying yes. This time, I made a quick decision. Therefore, pushing plus buttons can lead people to scrap analytic thinking and give in to an emotional response in their decision-making.

Despite the possibility of manipulation, pushing plus buttons can enhance a group’s ability to do excellent work together. Dutton (2003) developed a theory regarding how to establish and maintain high-quality connections at work and described how respectful engagement was a key component. Colleagues who are present and attentive towards each other create energising relations and lay the foundation for excellent and miraculous collaborations. I take the practice of pushing plus buttons to be a crucial part of keeping the collective flame alive in groups and organisations. Work environments where people hold back and seldom give compliments will miss a rich and inexpensive energy source. The uplifting word need not be as expressive and emotionally loaded as those I received

from Saarinen. Microexpressions of acknowledgement can have astonishing positive effects.

In this chapter, I identified pushing plus buttons as the fifth quality I have found present in well-functioning communication climates. I have noticed this set of qualities in my studies of how people communicate in groups and organisations. To recapitulate, the first quality under scrutiny was friendly friction. It is present when colleagues and group members provide friction to each other's ideas and suggestions in a friendly atmosphere. Friendly friction is situated between two undesirable opposites. When there is friction without friendliness, people tend not to listen carefully and to notice the constructive elements in the input they receive. When there is friendliness without friction, immature ideas are taken forward without having gone through thorough criticism and testing. The middle ground of friendly friction is crucial to establish and maintain in a group or an organisation as a platform for high-quality dissent in collaborative processes.

The second quality was that of having tolerance for false alarms. I distinguished between active and passive speech mistakes, as well as between saying something that should have remained unsaid and not saying something that should have been said. People may assume that remaining silent is the safest option because it means that you did not make a mistake, but that assumption disregards the category of passive speech mistakes. In organisations where it is important to speak up even when someone is in doubt, it is useful to have a tolerance for false alarms or for making active speech mistakes. Otherwise, employees will hesitate to voice their concerns in critical quality moments. If those who have sounded false alarms receive repercussions, people will sense that it is best to remain quiet even though they sense that something bad is about to happen. It is better to celebrate and be grateful for the initiatives, even in situations where they build on a false understanding of the situation.

Psychological safety was the third quality I outlined. It is present when group members perceive it safe to take interpersonal risk by raising concerns and criticism in front of others in the group. Psychological safety does not mean that the work environment is comfortable and cosy. Rather, the foundation makes it safe to engage in heated conversations where participants can freely challenge each other's perspectives without fearing repercussions. Neutralisation of hierarchies can strengthen psychological

safety. Possibly, psychological safety can reach a tipping point, where people feel it is safe to use harassing language towards colleagues because they sense they are insulated from negative consequences.

The fourth quality I identified as crucial to communication climate was that of having scope for agency. When people sense that there is scope for agency at work, it means that they perceive themselves as agents rather than pawns. Agency is crucially bound to the past, it takes place in the present, and it is oriented towards the future. Habits and routines have established schemas for coping with present challenges, but when something unexpected happens, there are no established scripts for what to do next. Critical quality moments occur when the conductor gives the wrong tone to the choir, or the senior engineer moves forward with a faulty plan for a bridge. These moments call for innovation and initiative. They are best addressed in a communication climate where there is scope for agency.

Finally, I showed that the practice of pushing plus buttons generates energy in individuals and groups. In a communication climate where it is common to be generous with compliments and positive feedback, high-quality connections can be made among colleagues, and they can achieve wonderful results together.

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PART III



Communication Ethics

Abstract Freedom of speech and speech responsibility are the two main concepts of communication ethics. The former addresses people's freedom to say what they want or to remain silent, while the latter concerns the responsibilities people may have for speaking up and for the consequences of saying something or remaining silent. The traditions of consequentialist ethics and duty ethics provide conflicting normative advice about how to cope with communication dilemmas, where the alternatives can be to prioritise outcomes (the good) or conduct (the right). This chapter uses examples of decisions regarding transparency or secrecy about confidential information and i-deals at work to illustrate ethical challenges and dilemmas regarding communication.

Keywords Freedom of speech • Speech responsibility • Communication ethics • Do-good ethics • Avoid-harm ethics

Trade union representatives in an organisation can possess confidential information that it is tempting to share with members. A new and improved pension scheme for employees may be underway and will be announced 1 month from now. Until then, information about the scheme cannot be shared with anyone. During this time, a trade union representative may encounter a member who has decided to hand in her resignation and look for work elsewhere. The representative knows that if the member

withholds her resignation for 1 month, she will gain a considerable long-term financial benefit from the improved pension scheme. This is objectively speaking not a good time to resign from the organisation. The representative can take the member aside and advise her to wait another month before she hands in the resignation. However, that would be to break confidentiality and loyalty to the organisations. Should that take priority over loyalty to the member, whose financial prospects for the rest of her life will be considerably better if she postpones her resignation for 1 month?

I have discussed this situation with trade union representatives, and their responses surprisingly vary. Some claim that the obvious answer is to respect the confidentiality and say nothing about the improved pension scheme to the member. They maintain that this is just the sort of situation where the professionalism and suitability to be a trade union representative is put to the test. Emotions and impulses cannot govern one's decisions. This representative has a particular role in workplace processes and needs to adhere to the strict norms for collaboration between employers and employee organisations. Others take the opposite view and argue that it is obvious that loyalty should lie with the individual members, and not with the organisation or employer. As a trade union representative, this person should support the weakest stakeholders, which in this case, clearly is the individual member. Information in such cases can flow discreetly, and no one will know that in this exceptional case, the representative prioritised the member's interest over confidentiality and the organisation's interest.

The Navigation Wheel is a tool designed to aid decision-makers in situations such as these (Kvalnes and Øverenget 2012). It identifies six relevant concerns to consider when deciding upon a way forward (Fig. 12.1).

When trade union representatives reflect on the case regarding disclosing the new pension scheme, all six concerns are relevant. In the discussions I have facilitated, participants have prioritised the Identity question. What core values should an individual commit to when representing a trade union? The disagreements between them highlight different interpretations of the role and where their loyalties should lie. There is also a Morality element in their conflicting stances. When presented with the case, each representative has a moral intuition—a gut feeling—about what a trade union representative should do under such circumstances. In the ensuing discussion, participants tend to remain loyal to their initial moral intuition. On rare occasions, representatives may change their minds.



Fig. 12.1 Navigation wheel

With time to reflect and consider perspectives, they realise that the arguments for sharing/not sharing the information about the pension scheme with the member is stronger/weaker than they initially thought.

The Navigation Wheel builds on a particular understanding of the relation and difference between morality and ethics. Morality is defined as a set of personal and shared beliefs about right and wrong, and ethics as a tool for systematic analysis of right and wrong. The distinction corresponds to one between quick and impulsive System 1 decision-making and slow and analytical System 2 decision-making (Kahneman 2013). On this understanding, decisions made via moral intuition are examples of System 1 decision-making, while decisions based on ethical reflection are examples of System 2 decision-making.

With this interpretation in place, it is possible to reflect on aspects of both ways of making decisions about right and wrong. It provides a framework to analyse decision-making processes when people face dilemmas. The trade union representative may suddenly face a situation where a member is about to hand in a resignation where it is financially better to wait 1 month. There is no time to think, thus the representative will act on a moral intuition to intervene and advise the member to wait, or a moral

intuition to remain silent. When given the opportunity to revisit and re-evaluate the decision later, the representative may look to confirm or disconfirm arguments that it was the right thing to do. Confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998; Kvalnes 2017; Peters 2020) can lead the representative to notice only information and principles that support the initial decision. With more time and information, a change of perspective is possible, but the decision-maker can also remain loyal to their previous, underinformed self and only seek out confirmation that the initial decision was the right one. The process of System 2 ethical analysis may take the form of gathering support for the System 1 moral intuition. This means that an opportunity may be lost for establishing whether the decision was the right one.

A rationale for discussing potential dilemmas in advance, in a workshop setting, or in a seminar is to make the participants less vulnerable to being governed solely by their moral intuitions when they suddenly face such a situation. They receive an opportunity to become better prepared for real-world dilemmas by thinking through the alternatives together in a psychologically safe environment. Impulsive and automated decisions may not reflect what the decision-maker values and considers morally right. Preparation through ethical reflection can make the quick decisions in real life better aligned to the decision-maker's moral beliefs and convictions.

The communication climate for reflections on ethical dilemmas can be characterised by friendly friction and dissent, or the opposites of friendliness without friction, and in contrast, unfriendly friction. With friendly friction, people will address what they see as weaknesses and doubtful assumptions in the alternatives under scrutiny. They will add their voices to a process of seeking out the various alternatives' strengths and weaknesses as an act of good will towards the decision-maker. They are engaged in the case, and they are making a serious effort to help the decision-maker to identify the right course of action. With friendliness without friction, the decision-maker receives uncommitted and indifferent feedback from people who primarily want to avoid conflict and dissent. They will support any idea or suggestion coming from the decision-maker without considering whether it has flaws. In contrast, with unfriendly friction, the motivation can be to mobilise any kind of argumentation that will harm and defeat the decision-maker.

Whether to speak and share information or remain silent is the pattern for dilemmas addressed within communication ethics. In line with the general definition of ethics provided above, communication ethics is the

discipline of analysing what is right and wrong in the realm of communication (Kvalnes 2022). This philosophical discipline depends on two main concepts, each having their set of fundamental questions.

- *Freedom of speech*: When do people have the freedom to speak and write whatever they want, including a freedom to remain silent? What are the ethical limits to the form and content of people's expressions? To what extent can freedom of speech be limited by confidentiality agreements and other social arrangements?
- *Speech responsibility*: When do people have a responsibility to speak up about what they observe in their social environment? In which situations do they have a moral duty to intervene verbally? To what extent are they responsible for the consequences of speaking up and of remaining silent? What happens to individual speech responsibility when individuals are part of a group where all members have a freedom to speak?

These questions suggest some of the directions that reflections on freedom of speech and speech responsibility can take. There can be many others. The former concept gets more attention than the latter, both academically and in society and organisations. Freedom of speech is often highlighted in discussions about employee rights and the rights of professionals. This freedom can be threatened when employers try to restrict employees' participation in discourses about organisational developments. Researchers have been concerned about employers' initiatives to control the verbal activities of employees who may want to express dissent and disagreement (Kassing 2000; Balkin 2018). There is a long tradition of considering freedom of speech as crucial for employee empowerment and autonomy (Haskins 1996). However, a comprehensive communication ethics for organisations also needs to account for the responsibilities that come with a freedom to express one's ideas and concerns. Attending only to freedom of speech and not to speech responsibility creates an imbalanced communication ethics.

Returning to the trade union example, it tests the understanding of both freedom of speech and speech responsibility. What can a trade union representative say in a situation where a member is about to make a financially unsound decision by handing in a resignation 1 month before a new pension scheme comes into effect? One perspective is that the case

illustrates the limits to freedom of speech. A representative cannot break a confidentiality agreement, even when it is out of commendable concern for a member. The opposite view can be to highlight freedom of speech and claim that it has priority over loyalty to one's organisation and the norms of collaboration between employers and employee organisations. A representative can appeal speech responsibility to justify the alternative of interfering to make the member aware of the new pension scheme underway.

Normative ethics contains two main traditions that provide conflicting views in a range of dilemmas and choices. Consequentialist ethics prioritises the outcome (the good) over conduct (the right), while duty ethics does the opposite, claiming that the way people act (the right) is more important than how things turn out (the good) (Kvalnes 2019). The two traditions provide different advice about what a person should do in situations where the alternatives are to speak up or to remain silent, or there is a choice between different ways of expressing one's views.

A consequentialist communication ethics will build its input on considerations about probable outcomes. The trade union representative should inform the member about the new pension scheme, if that alternative is likely to provide the best overall outcome. If the conversation can remain a secret between them, the positive financial consequences for the member can be sufficient to make it right to go for that initiative. In contrast, if it is likely that the confidential information will spread and create difficulties for the organisation and the representative who has broken the promise to keep the plan secret, that fuels a consequentialist rejection of the alternative of sharing the information. For a duty ethical communication ethics, identifying what is the right thing to do does not depend on considerations about likely outcomes. Instead, it rests on concerns about keeping promises and respecting confidentiality. If an individual has reached an agreement within a group about not sharing information before a particular date, then they should remain committed to that agreement and not say anything, even to a person whose situation would be greatly improved if that individual were to do so.

A core element more or less explicitly shared by consequentialist ethics and duty ethics is the principle of equality (Kvalnes 2019). It states that equal cases should be treated equally. A difference in treatment between two cases requires pointing to a morally relevant difference between them. It is a philosophical principle inherited from Aristotle's writings more than 2000 years ago, but small children apply and appeal to it long before they

have learned to read and write. They can have a strong sense of fairness and expect that any differential treatment can be justified by pointing to a relevant difference. Siblings can bicker about what counts as relevant differences when parents make decisions about distributing advantages and disadvantages. In organisations, leaders are under similar pressure to justify and explain why some employees receive higher salaries and better working conditions than others do, and why some must take the most demanding shifts. So-called *i-deals*, or idiosyncratic deals, that employees can negotiate for themselves open for individual differences in flexibility, compensation, and opportunities for further education (Rousseau 2015). It makes good sense to allow *i-deals* and not to treat everyone in a standardised manner, but they can create unrest unless the differences in treatment are properly justified.

The principle of equality is highly relevant for communication ethics, and the level of openness about *i-deals* can serve as an example. Leaders and employees can face an ethical dilemma about whether to keep *i-deals* transparent or secret. The level of openness can be about the existence of the deal and about its rationale and specific content. It is possible to be transparent about how an employee has an *i-deal* without explicating why and what specifically constitutes it. It seems unreasonable to operate with one general and absolute norm regarding whether one should be transparent about *i-deals* or keep them secret. What one should communicate about them depends on each case's unique circumstances.

The ethical dimensions of establishing and communicating about *i-deals* emerge as a significant research topic. In her doctoral thesis, Raets (2022) started important work to address and clarify the ethics of *i-deals*, introducing the idea that transparency should be the *prima facie* norm for communication about them. The normative hypothesis is that one should be open about *i-deals*, but that there may be exceptional cases where the situation's morally relevant features call for secrecy. Privacy considerations are among those that can count in favour of secrecy. A similar openness to exception can apply to the trade union example. The norm can be that one should keep confidential information secret, but there can be room for exceptions, such as when a person is about to make a financially unsound decision, and an individual can intervene and avoid the negative outcome by sharing the confidential information. However, the principle of equality can also serve as a platform for powerful criticism of the decision of a trade union representative who chooses to inform one member about the pension scheme. The representative happened to meet this one member, but

other members may have had a similar interest in knowing about the pension scheme before publication. A chance encounter does not seem to provide a strong reason for ethical differentiation.

Chapter 2 introduced the concept of critical quality moments to describe situations where a communication climate is tested. Will anyone intervene to correct the tone from the conductor, halt the execution of faulty engineering plans, or suggest a better substitution to the football coach? Decision-making in such situations can have ethical implications. As an eyewitness to a dramatic event at work, an employee can decide whether to speak up and take an initiative to stop a causal chain of events that will likely lead to a negative outcome. The situation can also be one where a supportive verbal initiative can give a colleague an uplifting experience. If freedom of speech were the only element of communication ethics, the decision-maker would only need to consider whether to use that freedom to say something or to remain silent. However, critical quality moments can also provide the decision-maker with a responsibility to become involved. Speech responsibility indicates that an individual should not remain a passive bystander and justify it by appealing to their freedom to speak or not. Here, they are in a position where they have the power either to prevent a negative outcome or to produce a positive one. That can create a responsibility to become verbally involved. Appeals to freedom of speech are not sufficient to justify silence.

One final distinction is helpful in obtaining an overview of the elements of communication ethics. The alternatives of speaking up and remaining silent can prevent negative outcomes and produce positive ones, as captured in an ethics for avoiding harm and an ethics for doing good (Table 12.1).

Some have described this distinction as one between prescriptive and proscriptive ethics (Janoff-Bulman et al. 2009). The ethics of avoiding harm includes not just concerns about intervening to stop harm to others but also concerns about using aggressive and hurtful language in communication with others. So-called hate speech tests the limits of freedom of

Table 12.1 Ethical perspectives on outcomes

<i>Avoid-harm ethics</i>	<i>Do-good ethics</i>
Take steps to avoid negative experiences and outcomes for others	Contribute to positive and uplifting experiences and outcomes for others

speech (Howard 2019). Again, if freedom of speech were the only element of communication ethics, it would be difficult to argue against hate speech. With a concept of speech responsibility in place, there are boundaries for what people can justifiably say to or about other people. Avoid-harm ethics also gives weight to concerns about how words and utterances can negatively affect others.

In this chapter, I have shown that a balanced communication ethics needs to highlight freedom of speech as well as speech responsibility. Employees should not only have a freedom to express their views or remain silent but also have some form of responsibility for the outcomes of their decision to speak or not. The Navigation Wheel can serve as a tool to analyse situations where individuals can be in doubt about what to do. It identifies law, identity, morality, reputation, economy, and ethics as six aspects that can be necessary to take into account when reasoning about the alternatives. Consequentialist ethics and duty ethics emphasise different dimensions of human relations and can provide conflicting answers in communication dilemmas. Both acknowledge the principle of equality but can differ on what they consider a situation's morally relevant features. The distinction between avoid-harm ethics and do-good ethics can serve to highlight what is at stake in decisions about speaking up or remaining silent, and about which words individuals can justifiably use in communication with others.

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Countering Moral Neutralisation

Abstract The communication climate in an organisation can serve as a platform for expressing disagreement and dissent against efforts to justify unethical behaviour. This chapter describes how alternatives to act against one's moral convictions and standards can create moral dissonance, a mismatch between something one can be tempted or ordered to do and one's morality. In such circumstances, one option is to dismiss the alternative, while another is to engage in moral neutralisation, a practice of finding excuses and justifications for going forward with this alternative. This process can lead to a normalisation of questionable behaviour. In a well-functioning communication climate, decision-makers are challenged in the critical quality moments when they start to engage in moral neutralisation.

Keywords Moral dissonance • Moral neutralisation • Relational moral luck • Fragility of goodness • Democratic business ethics • Volkswagen

In 2015, the car manufacturer Volkswagen was caught having installed “defeat devices” in its diesel vehicles. These devices detected when the vehicles were driven under emission test conditions and would only then turn on emission controls. They switched off during normal driving, meaning that the vehicles' performance improved while up to 40 times more nitrous oxide was released. The cheating was designed to make the vehicles

meet emission standards in the United States and other countries. Ensuing investigations revealed that the device had been installed in around 11 million vehicles worldwide. Volkswagen faced a corporate scandal. Almost one-third of its market value was lost in less than a week. Only two years earlier, the company had received an Ethics in Business award at the World Forum of Ethics in Business for its extraordinary efforts to reduce its negative impact on the environment and take social responsibility (Rhodes 2016).

In the scandal's aftermath, researchers have explored how it affected Volkswagen's reputation and how the company has worked to regain trust (Li et al. 2018; Bachmann et al. 2019; Jung and Sharon 2019). Sales have increased in the years after the scandal, confirming that customers tend to have short attention spans (Mena et al. 2016). The case has been used to illustrate how corporations can become ethically self-obsessed, simultaneously extolling their ethical virtues, and deliberately hiding their criminal activity (Rhodes 2016). Here, I will apply it to reflect on how the communication climate in a workplace affects the extent to which unethical suggestions and ideas can take hold and evolve into unethical practices. I will use concepts from moral psychology to highlight how alternatives that initially go against the decision-makers' moral convictions can nevertheless become normal practice through processes of finding excuses and justifications for moving forward with them. A communication climate for questioning these attempts to neutralise moral misgivings can be crucial for avoiding small- and large-scale ethical misbehaviour in an organisation.

In a study of the antecedents of the 2008 financial crisis in Iceland, Salvör Nordal and I applied a three-step model to describe the possible emergence of unethical behaviour in an organisation (Kvalnes and Nordal 2018). Decision-makers can initially experience (a) moral dissonance, a conflict between their moral convictions and the alternative under consideration. When people experience moral dissonance, one option is to dismiss the alternative and remain committed to the moral convictions with which it conflicts. Another option is to engage in (b) moral neutralisation, a process of finding excuses for moving forward with the alternative despite the initial moral misgivings. This process can lead to (c) normalisation of questionable behaviour, where the unethical practice becomes unquestioned routine. We derived this third step from Donaldson (2012) and his analysis of how the international financial crisis around 2008 demonstrated how, "bad practices can become institutionalised, and initial queasiness gives way to industry-wide acceptance" (p. 6). What he calls "queasiness" is equivalent to what I call moral dissonance.

In our study, we found evidence that developments along these lines had occurred in the financial institutions in Iceland, creating practices that eventually caused a collapse of the country's banking system in October 2008. Financial advisors and bank managers had developed practices of pushing high-risk product on their clients and of making dubious investments on their employers' behalf. In the beginning, some of the individuals involved experienced moral dissonance. Those who did either quit the financial industry or engaged in moral neutralisation, a process that put them on course for normalising questionable behaviour.

Little is known about the internal processes in Volkswagen leading up to installing devices that were designed to deceive the emission tests. At least 50 engineers, technicians, and managers were reported to have known about the cheating (Mansouri 2016). They were working in a corporate environment where all the compliance elements were in place, including the required codes of conduct and reports on social and environmental responsibility. Simultaneously, they were under pressure to deliver on ambitious commercial goals. Did any of the senior or junior staff involved in the process experience moral dissonance, or did they simply follow orders to do whatever was needed to make the vehicles ready for the American market? Were executives in the company actively quelling moral dissent and disagreement? If anyone did experience moral dissonance, did moral neutralisation processes follow it, where they sought out excuses for why it was acceptable to install the deceptive device? Furthermore, did this process create a platform for normalising deception, where people stopped noticing the unethical nature of what practice? These empirical questions remain unanswered, but likely the level of friction and dissent among the people working on the task was low. It appears that they were using their competence to fix a problem and could do so without moral concerns holding them back.

The concept of moral neutralisation builds on the work of criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957). Based on interviews with juvenile delinquents, they identified five techniques of neutralisation, which can take the following form.

- Denial of responsibility: The ordinary conditions for responsibility are not met. The agent is following orders or doing what everyone else is doing. There is no real choice involved.
- Denial of injury: Nobody will notice the difference if the agent refrains from behaving in this manner. The negative effect from this individual act is minimal.

- Denial of victim: The people involved are neither innocent nor naïve. They would most likely have done the same if roles had been reversed.
- Condemnation of condemners: Those who are critical to this practice do not know about what they are talking. Ideology or false assumptions about the activity they are condemning govern them.
- Appeal to higher loyalties: The agent owes it to family, employer, organisation, or other supporters to go forward with this alternative.

Subsequent research has identified other categories of techniques, some of which overlapping with the initial five techniques. One pattern we found in the Icelandic study was an appeal not to break any rules. Sykes and Matza's (1957) outline did not capture this kind of moral neutralisation set of techniques. Decision-makers in the financial sector in Iceland claimed that their activities were in accordance with the standards the governing authorities established. If this kind of practice were unethical, the rule makers would surely have identified it and formulated a rule. Building on Pogge's (1992) initial work, I have previously labelled this way of thinking as loophole ethics (Kvalnes 2019). It is operative when decision-makers systematically look for and exploit loopholes in the rulebook. If the legislators respond to this activity by making new rules to cover up the loopholes, it will likely initiate more loophole ethics because this countermeasure can be interpreted to confirm that the appeal to a lack of rules is a valid justification. A critique of loophole ethics would argue that ethical concerns and expectations go beyond following specific rules. It is reasonable to expect that the decision-maker applies common sense and personal judgement to the case, and thus, goes beyond mere rule abidance.

When Sykes and Matza (1957) introduced their neutralisation theory, they presented an alternative to a character explanation of misconduct. They challenged a dominant assumption about juvenile delinquents. These people were considered morally damaged, operating from moral standards that deviated from those found in society. Bad character explained their criminal activities. During interviews, the two criminologists found that the delinquents actually adhered to the same moral standards as their noncriminal peers. What set them apart from others was that they had engaged in moral neutralisation. Initial moral misgivings had disappeared when they could convince themselves and each other that the activity of breaking into people's homes was morally acceptable.

These findings point towards circumstance explanations of misconduct to supplement at least the character explanations. Whether a person becomes engaged in moral wrongdoing can depend on the social setting and the amount of friction and opposition that others raise towards moral neutralisation attempts, more so than on character and inner moral qualities. Each individual depends on colleagues, friends, and other people to interfere in situations where they sense that they are providing dubious excuses for moving forward with a questionable alternative. This topic has ancient roots. Nussbaum (2001) explored it in her work on classical Greek conceptions of morality. The fragility of goodness preoccupied philosophers, poets, and dramatists at that time, and it remains a concern for humans everywhere. We are morally frail in the sense that we can be blind to unethical aspects of our behaviour and may at crucial decision points engage in moral neutralisation. In circumstances where nobody points out the destructive tendencies in our reasoning or behaviour, we can end up like the juvenile delinquents in the Sykes and Matza (1957) study. There may be nothing wrong with our moral convictions and beliefs, but we have found ways to silence or avoid them under these circumstances. I have previously described our dependency on others to intervene as a case of being susceptible to relational moral luck, or luck in the social company when we face these challenging situations (Kvalnes 2019).

An organisation's communication climate sets the foundation for countering moral neutralisation. When leaders and employees attempt to find excuses for moving forward with an alternative that has created moral dissonance, there is a need for active opposition. Decision-makers may suffer from inattentional blindness and fail to see the unethical aspect of what they are considering. The situation calls for moral dissent and opposition. One or more engineers in Volkswagen came up with the idea to create a device that would camouflage the real emissions from the company's diesel vehicles. When that idea first came into view, it likely caused some form of moral dissonance, either from the initiators or from the colleagues to whom they presented it. The public might never know what happened next and whether extensive moral neutralisation took place before the idea was washed free of moral misgivings and brought forward to be executed. I am curious whether there were any critical quality moments during the process, situations where a sharp and precise intervention could have stopped the plan. If the whole process from idea work to realisation was frictionless, it does not reflect well on the engineers, executives, and other professionals involved.

All five qualities that characterise a well-functioning communication climate can be tested in circumstances where moral neutralisation takes place. This is an opportunity to (a) apply friendly friction and offer counterarguments to efforts to make the moral dissonance disappear. With unfriendly friction, there is less likelihood that the neutralisers will listen and take the misgivings seriously. They can dismiss the misgivings as unkind attacks, directed at them personally and not at the alternative they are considering. With friendliness without friction, the initiators can interpret the lack of criticism as support for the stance they are developing. The combination of friction delivered in a friendly manner is needed. It can also be important with (b) a tolerance for false alarms. To encourage people to intervene whenever they sense that moral neutralisation is taking place, it is necessary to tolerate that they sometimes misunderstand the situation and raise concerns that result in being unwarranted. Such instances also help to maintain (c) psychological safety in the group. People experience that they can express moral concerns about the ongoing justifications of a plan that is soon to be initiated without being totally convinced about their argument. If it turns out that they have overlooked an important aspect of the situation, it does not put them in a bad light with the initiators. Those who perceive that moral neutralisation is taking place in their work environment depend on a high level of psychological safety to formulate a challenge. If they sense that this form of interpersonal risk will lead to repercussions against them, they will likely remain silent. If there is (d) scope for agency in such situations, people can adopt an agent position, and not simply be pawns waiting for instructions. In the aftermath of internal strife about moral neutralisation, it is possible to (e) push plus buttons and acknowledge the efforts of those who have actively opposed what they have seen as moral neutralisation attempts. Doing that can strengthen the resolve to provide friendly friction in future similar circumstances.

Moral neutralisation can generate constructive friction and dissent in an organisation. I question how likely such responses will emerge within powerful corporations. As Rhodes (2016) noted, Volkswagen's emission scandal came about through initiatives from a network of individuals and institutions outside the organisational and beyond the business sphere. Probing from researchers and NGOs brought about the disclosure of deception. In his study of the case, Rhodes (2016) launched the idea of a democratic business ethics, where the free press, trade unions, political pressure groups, social movement organisations, and universities question corporate practices. Traditional business ethics as the corporations practice tends to signal sovereignty and self-sufficiency. It indicates there is no

need for members of civic society to monitor, doubt, or question the decision-making that takes place in business. Executives can point to elaborate codes of conduct that all employees must read, and to annual ethical training as part of compliance work. Crises emerging in the financial sector and in Volkswagen and other powerful corporations give rise to deep suspicion of this way of thinking. Dissent and friction from outside the organisations are necessary to force a reorientation in business.

Despite these misgivings about the internal capacity for opposition to moral neutralisation, it is worthwhile to attempt establishing and maintaining a constructive communication climate in organisations. This can be a climate where it is normal and appreciated to raise concerns and disagree with ideas and plans being considered. There may be further serious and systematic internal dissent in corporations than what Rhodes indicated. The narratives that gain attention are about ethical scandals and processes that brutal self-interest drive. Narratives about people who speak up and manage to steer their organisations more ethically seldom receive media attention. They may turn up in glossy self-representations the corporations publish, and in that context, they lack plausibility. However, there can be situations in both the private and the public sectors of working life where there is real opposition to moral neutralisation, and initiatives from people within an organisation stops morally questionable initiatives.

This chapter has discussed countering moral neutralisation. I have shown that a constructive communication climate can serve as a counterweight to inattentional blindness regarding ethical aspects of an organisation's activities. When people become involved in moral neutralisation processes to overcome moral dissonance, they depend on others to challenge their dubious excuses and justifications. This line of thinking points to a limitation in character explanations of misconduct. Those who have been involved in ethical scandals at work may not have acted from deviant moral convictions or beliefs. Instead, they may have suffered from bad relational moral luck. Before we condemn and criticise wrongdoers, we should remember the fragility of goodness and how dependent we are on interventions from others at the times when we fail to see the gorilla in our midst.

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Whistleblowing

Abstract Whistleblowing is to report and disclose perceived misbehaviour in an organisation. The initiative to blow the whistle is often a last resort and comes about when normal verbal exchanges in the workplace do not suffice to identify and remedy objectionable conduct. In a communication climate where friendly friction and dissent are commonplace, there is rarely a need for whistleblowing. People address critical issues when they occur, halting toxic and negative developments. Whistleblowing involves considerable personal risk and can damage career progression. Three pieces of advice for potential whistleblowers are to (1) form alliances and gather strength in numbers, (2) thoroughly document their concerns, and (3) take steps to downgrade the importance of blowing the whistle in their professional lives.

Keywords Whistleblowing • Communication ethics • Johari Window • Psychological safety • Fairness • Loyalty

The police student had his practice year in his own hometown, at the police station where he hoped to acquire a job after his studies. Most of his family and friends lived there, and he would like to settle down close to them. He had been fortunate to get the practice year at this station. It provided him an opportunity to become familiar with the work environment where he planned to make a police career. In the beginning, he

found it exciting to patrol the streets and neighbourhoods he knew so well. He also enjoyed being in full police uniform when he met friends and acquaintances on the street. After a few weeks, the police student started to work in tandem with one of the veteran police officers, a person he remembered from his teenage years as a calming presence in the streets of the town centre. The two had to intervene in numerous late-night brawls and ended up arresting some of the culprits. The police student thought that the veteran used more brutal methods and language than necessary when making the arrests. He did not like to witness this brutality and tried to talk with the veteran about it. The colleague brusquely dismissed him and claimed that he was too young and inexperienced to know how to deal with these kinds of people. During one encounter in a park, the student was shocked to see the veteran's aggression towards a drunk man. From his perspective, this behaviour was clearly not in line with the rule-book for responsible police work. The police student had to decide whether to report what he had witnessed, or let it pass. It felt wrong to keep silent. He decided to tell his superior, and thereby, he became a whistleblower (Kvalnes 2022).

Whistleblowing is, “the disclosure by organisation members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organisations that may be able to effect action” (Near and Miceli 1985). The decision about whether to blow the whistle often rests on the trade-off that people make between fairness and loyalty to the organisation or group to which they belong (Dungan et al. 2015). Fairness may draw the potential whistleblowers towards the option of reporting the unethical behaviour, while loyalty to the workplace may hold them back from doing so. The decision-makers can face a conflict between a moral concern for the fair treatment of others and a moral concern for the organisation's well-being (Dungan et al. 2019). A more complex scenario can be one where even loyalty towards the organisation can trigger a whistleblowing initiative. The whistleblower can assume that it will be in the organisation's best interest to bring attention to the perceived misconduct. A more adequate description of the situation may then be that the trade-off is between loyalty towards the organisation and loyalty towards oneself. Blowing the whistle can benefit the organisation but become a personal burden for the whistleblower.

Reporting about objectionable practices at work can occur through internal and external channels. Some organisations have established channels for anonymous whistleblowing to reduce the personal risk often

involved in bringing attention to critical issues at work. An external unit receives the message and can take further action without revealing the whistleblower's identity. However, anonymous channels can become a slippery slope, where anyone can report anything about anyone, without any fear of having to stand up and defend the message. The psychological safety level is high because there is no personal risk involved in blowing the whistle. It is an open empirical question whether anonymity will be misused in this manner, or for the most part, lead to healthy disclosure of immoral practices in organisations (Elliston 1982).

The police student who blew the whistle on his veteran colleague became the subject of severe negative responses in the organisation. The recipients of his message took it seriously and decided to reprimand the veteran for his conduct, but the outcome was worse for the whistleblower. He became isolated at work, and soon realised that it would be impossible to get a permanent job at this police station. This was his hometown, and the place where he wanted to settle after graduation, but the responses from colleagues to his initiative of reporting the veteran clarified that he would have to seek employment elsewhere. He was bewildered and frustrated because he had expected others to understand his reasons for blowing the whistle. Instead, colleagues turned their backs on him. He became a lone figure at the station, one who colleagues avoided and excluded from their social networks. The student clearly felt that he was unwelcome in the organisation.

In seminars with police leaders, I have presented this case and invited them to reflect on it. How would they have coped with the situation? What steps should a leader take under such circumstances? They agreed that the student did the right thing in following his conscience and reporting what he interpreted to be unnecessarily brutal conduct from the colleague. He appears to have acted from a sense of fairness and out of loyalty to the organisation, believing that it was necessary to stand up and dissent when witnessing unacceptable police work. Even so, these police leaders have been hesitant to say they would have supported him and taken steps to make him stay. What if he had applied for a job at their police station? Given that he had been the best qualified for a vacancy, would they have offered him the opportunity to start his police career at their station? If so, would they have suggested to share the whistleblowing story with his new colleagues or tried to hide it? These questions have created mixed answers and responses from the police leaders. Some have maintained that the student has proven to be bold, courageous, and just the sort of person

needed to raise the quality of police work, while others have claimed that realistically, this person would never be accepted in their work environment where loyalty to the police force and your colleagues is paramount.

Whistleblowing can be seen as a desirable response to perceived injustices or illegalities at work and ways to encourage and support people to blow the whistle can be sought. Highlighting the value of friction and dissent does this. Dungan et al. (2019) suggested that employees could be motivated to engage in whistleblowing if they sense the organisation values constructive dissent within the confines of maintaining group loyalty. Appreciating and celebrating friction can lower the threshold for blowing the whistle.

Another approach can be to establish and encourage a communication climate where it is normal to speak up and address critical issues whenever they occur, and thus, make whistleblowing superfluous. Reporting to an internal or external unit about misbehaviour is usually a last resort, an alternative that occurs when ordinary conversations have not sufficed to make people within the organisation notice the misbehaviour and take it seriously. In an organisation where it is normal to have friendly friction and tolerance for false alarms, and where people sense that it is psychologically safe to challenge each other, the need for whistleblowing is likely minimal. People can address critical issues early, before they grow and become toxic. From this perspective, to establish a channel for anonymous reporting of misconduct is a declaration of failure to establish a communication climate where friendly friction and dissent is normal.

A version of the Johari Window (Luft and Ingham 1961)—discussed in Chap. 5—can illustrate the information asymmetries that can exist between a whistleblower and the leaders in an organisation (Table 14.1).

When the police student reports the veteran colleague's brutality, his intention is to bring information from the Blind Spot into the Arena. He has noticed something important that of which the leadership at the police station appears to be unaware. A similar pattern occurs in other whistleblowing cases. The initiatives build on the assumptions that there are some

Table 14.1 Johari Window for whistleblowing

	<i>Known to the leaders</i>	<i>Unknown to the leaders</i>
Known to the whistleblower	Arena	Blind Spot
Unknown to the whistleblower	Façade	Unknown

currently unknown facts to the leaders and that the leaders ought to know about them.

Handling Blind Spot issues echoes back to the silence mystery outlined in Chap. 1. It occurs when people are in a position to say something that, from their perspective, is important, but decide to remain silent. They have important information that can enlighten an ongoing discussion and make a significant difference in how decision-makers view their options. Nevertheless, they decide to remain silent. There can be various reasons for the silence. They can be connected to emotions ranging from fear to compassion. If the recipient has a history of responding with anger to critical input from others, people will unlikely raise their voices and share the information that may trigger an angry response. If concerns are already weighing down the recipient, people may reason that more bad news—although highly relevant—will destroy them. Better to keep quiet. The silence means that crucial information remains in the decision-makers' Blind Spot, opening up for misguided decisions and behaviour.

Whistleblowing is a psychologically complex phenomenon because the recipients of the new information may have preferred that it had remained in their Blind Spot. Their stance may be one of wilful blindness (Marcus 1993; Heffernan 2011). A police chief may not want detailed information about how arrests are made and suspects are treated in the police station. The leadership in an oil and gas company may not want to know exactly how their company won a contract in one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Top management in Volkswagen may not have wanted to know just how their diesel engines were designed to pass the emission tests. A whistleblower may naively believe that people in the hierarchy above them will be grateful for information about such matters, and they may realise too late that they prefer being ignorant to the issue. They have chosen the stance of being wilfully blind.

Whistleblowing usually involves grave personal risk, and many whistleblowers experience that the initiative becomes the start of a downward career spiral. Similar to the police student in the opening example, they regret speaking up. Even so, there are examples of constructive whistleblowing where the initiators do not suffer the typical negative career consequences. Based on observations of various cases, I have formulated three pieces of advice to people who contemplate blowing the whistle (Kvalnes 2022).

1. Act together—form an alliance with other concerned individuals.
2. Make sure that your initiative builds on solid documentation.
3. Take steps to downgrade the importance of the act in your professional life.

Gunsalus (1998) emphasises the first of these and the importance of seeking strength in numbers. If people do not want to become involved, their reasons and justifications matter. They may agree with the potential whistleblower that the issue deserves attention but fear the repercussions of acting. Another possibility is that they disagree and believe that the issue is not important enough to report. The potential whistleblower should carefully consider the arguments of those who are unwilling to join and be willing to revise the assumption that the matter should be brought forward. The range of reasons presented by those who do not want to become involved should matter when deciding on how to move forward (Gunsalus 1998).

The cause of many whistleblowers' downfall seems to be a neglect of one or more of the three above points. In many instances, (1) the whistleblower stands alone and isolated, (2) people have doubts about the facts to which they are pointing, and (3) the whistleblowing has become the one dramatic incident that dominates the person's professional and personal life. Recruiters hesitate to hire former whistleblowers and provide them with new job opportunities. That can seem like a harsh and disrespectful stance to take towards someone who has courageously brought attention to misconduct in an organisation. However, the reason for the hesitancy can be that the whistleblowers appear to be obsessed with the whistleblowing incident. It is the most important event in their lives, one that still preoccupies their minds to a high degree.

One notable example provides hope for positive whistleblowing outcomes. Diederik Stapel was a professor of social psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands until 2011. That year, he was suspended from his position because of revelations that he had fabricated and manipulated data for research. At least 56 works by Stapel and his coauthors have been retracted as a result of investigations into his activities (Jump 2011). His method for several years had been to collaborate with other researchers and students to develop a research design, and then tell the others to leave the data collection to him. Instead of doing proper field studies and approaching real subjects to gather their answers, he had then filled in questionnaires himself. He would then return to his university

with the false data to present and analyse it with his colleagues (Levelt 2012; Stapel 2014).

The process that led to Stapel's suspension started with a whistleblowing initiative from three PhD students at his university. They had suspicions about the data they received from him. The professor's narrative about data collection did not add up, and the answers he claimed to have received from his subjects were not convincing. The students made thorough inquiries to check the validity of Stapel's claims and became convinced that something was wrong. They approached management at the university with their findings. The ensuing investigation documented that Stapel had been fabricating data for several years. He admitted and regretted his conduct.

It seems that the whistleblowers who reported Stapel have avoided negative career consequences. They appear to have followed the pattern outlined above, in (1) forming an alliance and creating strength in numbers before moving forward with their concerns, (2) documenting their claims thoroughly, and (3) avoiding that the whistleblowing became the most important event in their professional lives. Others who contemplate whistleblowing can learn from this example, that careful planning and coordination can create a platform for successful reporting of misbehaviour in one's organisation.

This chapter has explored the connection between communication climate and whistleblowing. The opening example described how a police student reported his veteran colleague's brutality and he was punished for it by having his career and life plans disrupted. Reporting about perceived misbehaviour in one's organisation can be a risky initiative—one that may have damaging career consequences. When detecting objectionable practices, we can be torn between acting from a sense of fairness and acting from a concern for stability in the organisation. Speaking up to draw attention to unfairness can create unrest in the workplace. In a communication climate where it is normal to challenge each other and voice disagreements, initial misbehaviour will less likely develop into objectionable habits and patterns of practice. Friendly friction and dissent can make whistleblowing superfluous.

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Further Studies

Abstract Researchers and those studying communication climate can seek out narratives from working life. Collecting and interpreting such narratives can provide a better understanding of what constitutes a well-functioning communication climate, and what it takes to establish and maintain it. This final chapter provides suggestions for further investigation of critical quality moments, friendly friction, psychological safety, and other concepts from the book. Rich and vivid narratives from organisational life are the empirical gold that can help us study and understand the communication climate. Interviews and conversations are a primary data source. The interviewer needs to guide the interviewee beyond generalisations and probe for details about unfolding events. Reflections that begin as narratives can generate ideas for small-scale improvements in how people communicate and collaborate at work.

Keywords Communication climate • Narrative method • Psychological safety • Progress principle • High-quality connections

I recently had a call from a person who told me that she wanted to end her own life. She was close to a lake and explained that she called us at 113 because she wanted to be found by somebody other than family members. Her voice was slurred. I realised that this was serious, and that she had taken some

pills and only waited to become weak enough to drown herself. She did not want to tell me where she was calling from, and we could only see which area the call came from. I sent an ambulance to the area—that was priority. Then I waved towards my partner, who was available. I pointed to my headset and asked him to listen in on the conversation and to get enough resources, police and fire brigade, to get hold of a boat. All of this happened very quickly—to realise the seriousness of the situation and mobilise help—while I was sitting and talking with the caller. I had several people, resource coordinators and medical operators, listening in on the conversation and trying to figure out where she was. During our talk I asked her what she could see, where did she start—from her own home? Did she drive a car? Was it a long journey? I asked a lot of questions to locate her. It was a long conversation, more than 30 minutes. When I heard that the police had found her, I had a very good feeling. There and then we saved her from doing something that might not have been well thought through.

This story is from a Master of Management project thesis on the communication climate among nurses working at various local centres where they answer emergency calls from the public. Kjøllesdal (2018) interviewed 21 operators who answer calls to the emergency hotline and asked them to share their experiences of communication with callers, colleagues, and support units that had been particularly good. She received a range of vivid examples of professional collaboration that rested on a well-functioning communication climate. The operators regularly face dramatic life-and-death situations where the outcome can depend on their ability to interpret the messages from people in panic. One of the first things they need to decide is whether the situation is serious enough to send an ambulance. Sometimes the caller may be an unreliable witness to events and either exaggerate or downplay aspects of the situation. Is this a false alarm, or a confused message from someone who does not realise how urgent it is to act? The operator can invite colleagues to listen to the conversation and seek help in interpreting the situation to find an adequate response to it. From the caller's perspective, it seems that only one person is active on the other side, but a whole team may have been mobilised to find a constructive way forward.

Communication climate can be the focal point of future studies of workplace collaboration. Researchers can continue to explore what it takes to establish and maintain psychological safety in a group, and how to solve silence mysteries in organisations. There is also plenty of scope for students to investigate communication climate themes. Over the years, I have

supervised a range of master's theses and project assignments where students have explored how people communicate and collaborate in organisations. Executive students such as Kjøllesdal are highly motivated to learn more about what constitutes a well-functioning communication climate. They are eager to bring systematic knowledge about these issues back to their own organisations and to expand on their own leadership repertoires. In this final chapter, I would like to share some thoughts about how to conduct research and student explorations of the concepts and issues presented in the book.

An investigation into aspects of the communication climate in an organisation can take the form of a learning journey. I encourage students to identify a phenomenon they are curious about and would like to reach a better understanding of. I tell them that it can be helpful to formulate some preliminary hypotheses about what they are going to find out. Their current understanding and expectations are something to return to towards the end of the discussion, where they can reflect on the findings that have surprised them. If it turns out that nothing has surprised them during the exploration, they might be victims of confirmation bias and might have ignored information that has provided reasons to reconsider initial hypotheses and assumptions about the phenomenon.

A thesis or academic report about the communication climate in a group or organisation can follow the traditional structure of having an introduction with the context and research question, followed by a theory chapter, a description of the chosen method, leading up to a presentation of findings and answers to the research question, and ending with a discussion and conclusion. Along with this structure, it can be useful to heed the following points:

1. Formulate a research question.
2. Search for vivid and rich narratives.
3. Identify patterns and general learning points in them.
4. Suggest possible small improvement steps.

In a qualitative study, building on interviews and observations, one can experience that the material at hand provides answers to a different research question than the one you set out with. It can then be fruitful to revisit and reformulate the research question and hypotheses. In a quantitative study, based on questionnaires and other forms of factual data, changing the hypothesis after the data are known is considered to be a

questionable research practice (Kerr 1998), but with an explorative, qualitative study, it can be both normal and acceptable.

A research question about the communication climate in an organisation can build on concepts and ideas formulated in this book. Here are some examples:

- What are the critical quality moments in this organisation?
- What are the situations where the communication climate is put to the test?
- How do people in this organisation challenge each other's ideas, attitudes, and behaviour?
- To what extent are suggestions and ideas in this group subjected to friendly friction?
- How do the collaborations and successes in this group depend on psychological safety?
- When is the communication climate in this organisation at its best?

The opening quote from Kjøllesdal's thesis was part of an answer to the last question, specified in relation to nurses operating at an emergency call centre. She used input from her informants to theorise about communication climate, using concepts outlined in this book, and the concept of high-quality connections at work (Dutton 2003). A list of more specific research questions from other theses that I have supervised illustrates the variety of possible phenomena to explore:

- How do project managers create and cultivate a climate for friendly friction and generative resistance in large IT projects?
- When is the communication climate between midwives, doctors, and nurses in the delivery room at its best? When is it put to the test? What can they learn from their collaborative successes?
- What happened to the communication climate in this football club when the head coach and the assistant coach switched roles?
- What is the threshold for seeking help from a colleague among financial advisors in this unit?
- Which communication climate qualities are present, and which are missing in the social environment portrayed in this TV series?

It is possible to approach a group or organisation with a version of one of these questions or find other inroads into the communication climate at work.

The richest and most interesting theses about communication climate build on empirical gold, in the shape of vivid narratives from organisational life. Researchers and students in this field depend on input from practitioners who share concrete and lively examples. One recurring challenge in interviews is that the conversation may reach a general and overarching level and remain there. People might say that our communication climate is at its best when we are well prepared and agree upon the way forward. Here, the interviewer needs to probe for examples. What happens in a particular situation where one is well prepared and has a common script for what to do next? In one project, researchers had secured an interview with two highly successful tennis coaches, who regularly had been able to turn talents into successful tennis players. During the interview, the coaches explained that their work rested on giving the talents concrete challenges and tasks. This general answer opened an opportunity to investigate further. What could a challenge or task consist of? What would be the concrete steps in how the talents responded? Instead, the interviewers moved on to further general questions about the importance of motivation and support, and so on. Here was a critical quality moment in the research process. The interviewees provided an exciting but general answer about their methods. The interviewers had the opportunity to learn something deeper by probing for examples, but they did not take it.

Rich narratives, then, are the empirical gold one needs to build an interesting thesis about communication climate. Even equipped with this understanding, interviewers return from their conversations with practitioners with their notebooks and recording devices full of generalisations, material that at its best is empirical silver. They have encountered interviewees who talk at length about the general communication challenges, motivations, patterns, and scripts from their working life. The examples are either only briefly mentioned or absent.

Systematic preparation can lower people's barriers for sharing narratives. The interviewer can approach the interviewees in advance and ask them to think about a situation or two at work where the communication climate has been particularly good and bring those examples to the interview. Researchers can be reluctant to share their questions upfront, out of fear that it will make the interview less spontaneous and open. The interviewees can turn up with prepared statements, impeding the process of talking freely about the topic. However, asking them to prepare by thinking about concrete experiences and examples can make it easier to get beyond the generalisations.

The interviewer who is eager for narratives can come equipped with a set of probing questions to make the interviewees say more about the episode or situation they have brought to the interview. There can be various ways of unlocking experiences and getting people to talk about them. I have found the following set of questions useful, and so have my students:

- What happened?
- What did you do?
- Who were involved and what did they do?
- What were the obstacles you encountered?
- How did it end?
- What did you learn?

For each of these questions, it is important to probe further and ask: What else? Tell me more. Time and again you can repeat these follow-up phrases. An interviewer should not hesitate to reiterate: What else? Tell me more. During an interview it can turn out that one or two of the questions above are particularly important, and so should get more attention than the others.

When you have a set of narratives to reflect from, it is time to look for patterns. When Kjøllesdal finished her round of interviews with the operators at emergency call centres, she could start to look for common features in them. One of the first she noticed was that the operators sensed that the most dramatic situations brought out the best in themselves and their colleagues. When the stakes were high, as in the opening example where the operator and the team around her sought to prevent a suicide, people mobilised their best listening capacities and their professionalism in providing adequate input to the operator communicating with the caller. The study also documented how training and debriefing was crucial to create learning among the operators. Before they were handed the responsibility for taking emergency calls, they would work with a mentor, an experienced operator, and see how that person responded to calls. After every dramatic event, there would be a debriefing session with a supervisor to review the call and reflect on strengths and room for improvement. Some of the operators explained that they would scan the room at the beginning of the workday, noticing who would be at hand to collaborate and support if a caller reported an emergency. The quality of the communication

climate could vary with each shift and depend upon the personal resources of those present. Some colleagues were perceived to be more reliable in such situations than others. Some were more team oriented. Others had an individualistic attitude and preferred to shine alone, blocking them from becoming engaged in collaboration. The study concluded that high-quality connections at work (Dutton 2003) serve as a foundation for high-quality performances when professionals respond to emergencies.

The final point to make about studies of communication climate is that they can provide input to how organisations can improve the ways people communicate and collaborate at work. A process of sharing and dwelling on narratives can create learning. In the tradition of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, researchers have noted how experience alone does not create learning (Kolb et al. 2001; Kolb and Yeganeh 2011; Kolb 2014). It is a misunderstanding to think that working together on a project and getting things done in themselves constitute a learning process. People also need to articulate what they have experienced and make collective efforts to understand the various steps in the process. Experience coupled with reflection is what can create new insights and understandings of how to move forward and address tasks at work in better ways. Reflection on situations when the emergency call operators are at their best can provide learning in their own work environment and inspire similar reflections in other organisations. The debriefing sessions they undertake after dramatic events make it possible to process the information and learn together. As argued by Amabile and Kramer (2011) in their work on the progress principle, reflections on small accomplishments and breakthroughs can have a particularly powerful effect and guide future efforts.

The executive student thses that I have supervised on these topics typically end with suggestions for small-scale practical improvements. It can be to change the design of meetings to make more people speak up by giving everybody a chance to say something at the beginning. It can be to give the role of devil's advocate during presentations of new ideas to different people every time. It can be to introduce a short debriefing session towards the end of every workday or work process to increase learning. The introduction of these suggestions can be experimental and explorative. It is possible to test their usefulness and see if they are worth pursuing. Strengthening communication can be a process of introducing new ways of doing things through trial and error.

This final chapter has zoomed in on how to study and learn more about communication climates at work. The opening narrative was from a study of collaboration among nurses operating in emergency call centres. The nurses were invited to share examples from their own work experience where they had managed to coordinate help in stressful situations. The learning points from that study are relevant in other settings, both with regard to the research design of collecting and interpreting narratives, and with regard to the conclusions about how to create a foundation for collaboration. Similar studies from other practices and organisational contexts can create a better understanding of what constitutes a constructive communication climate.

The motivation for writing this book has been to understand better what it takes to establish and maintain a well-functioning communication climate in groups and organisations. I have theorised and presented concepts that can guide attempts to strengthen the communication between people in organisations. As a practitioner of applied philosophy, I have tried to connect my theorising with how we should cope with current societal challenges. I share with other researchers of human agency and motivation a sense of urgency to make a practical contribution that can strengthen our capacities to address the monumental challenges that humanity currently faces. Human responses to destructive political, social, and environmental developments locally and globally require that we mobilise our most excellent qualities. A well-functioning communication climate is the platform we depend on to conduct small-scale and large-scale miracles of collaboration.

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