

The One Thing the World Could Use More Of Now ...

Mahmuda Ali, Consultant and de Bono Six Thinking Hats and Serious Creativity Trainer

What is the one thing that this world could use more of? If your mind went immediately to 'kindness', we are definitely on the same page!

But this blog is not about that, so while I feel a need to share what is 'top of mind' for me these days, I *should* have phrased it differently. A clearer title would be along the lines of, "**The one thing the world could use more of ... in how we communicate with each other**".



In one of our online Six Thinking Hats leadership training sessions, we asked participants to share their favourite leadership tip or tool. A surprising response from one participant was '*my telephone*'. The response was a little surprising because I had a different expectation (bias) of the range of possible responses. Yet the more I reflected on this answer, the more I realized that it was a clear nod to the importance of two-way conversations that enable us to communicate in ways not possible using written words.

As a society, we are leaning more heavily on the written word to communicate. We are using emails, text messages and platforms that are more amendable to very shortened or stunted exchanges. These types of written exchanges are now our 'go-to' form of communicating. We use them for everything from making plans, to engaging in political discussions, or sharing the latest thing that is top of mind. While it's a very convenient way of communicating, we risk increased misunderstanding or confusion. Face-to-face communication is much better for clearing misunderstandings as soon as they occur, therefore, the phone as a leadership tool.

From my experience as a manager and workplace mediator, I saw how people unwittingly create misunderstanding and conflict through poorly worded or formulated emails. As we broaden our use of the written word to communicate more and more with friends and family (as we are seeing during our current pandemic times), we may be unwittingly triggering misunderstandings in our personal relationships. How can we counter this possibility?

There are a few things we can do, but the number one tip for immediate improvement to communication (regardless of whether we are face-to-face or communicating in writing) can be summed up in one word ... 'specificity'. But I will repeat it another three times for emphasis, and to highlight it as my personal crusade to strengthen our communications skills. Specificity ... specificity ... specificity!

Let's dive into an example. Imagine the following scenario:

At the office:

Friend 1: *Hey, what's the weather like? Should I bring a sweater to our picnic in the park?*

Friend 2: *It's warm out!*

At the park:

Friend 1: *I'm cold, why did you tell me it's warm?*

Friend 2: *It is warm! It's 18 degrees.*

Friend 1: *18 degrees is not warm ... 25 degrees is warm! (Then in an annoyed tone perhaps) I'm too cold to enjoy myself ... I should have brought a sweater!*

End Scene... but likely not the end of the lively discussion around this issue (either in 'inside' or 'outside' voices)!

This could have been avoided with the use of 'specificity'. If Friend 2 had said, "*It's 18 degrees out*", or "*I think it's warm, it's 18 degrees out there*". This would have absolved Friend 2 of any responsibility for the presence (or non-presence) of said sweater at the picnic. Friend 1 would be responsible for processing if 18 degrees was warm or cold for themselves, and if a sweater should be brought. Fingers could not be pointed elsewhere!

Specificity is useful everywhere. For example, it is helpful to be specific when identifying goals and objectives or when moving through difficult conversations. In addition to introducing clarity to any topic, being specific can reveal someone's agenda to confuse or obfuscate. My thinking is that this would be incredibly useful in our current political climate!

We tend to use concepts, labels or generalizations to describe or explain things, and then we rush quickly to judgment and then to action. It feels convenient as it speeds up the process, but it can be a dangerous shortcut. We are better served by engaging in the realm of specificity, which slows down our thinking and introduces more curiosity and exploration in our thinking process. This way, we arrive at a more accurate description of what is before us. Then, with increased understanding and clarity we can assess the best way to move forward in our beliefs or in our actions. If someone makes a sweeping comment, I suggest you ask for specifics; you will soon find out if the foundation of the generalization is solid or shaky.

For me, the use and practice of specificity has an 'elevated' status because clarity (achieved by being more specific) is an essential component for healthy thriving relationships. It is 'baked into' the formula of Non-Violent Forms of Communication (NVC) developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg¹. In a classic example on resolving conflict (link below), Dr. Rosenberg plays out a 'Do You Love Me' scenario between his giraffe and jackal puppets that reveals the importance of clarity in understanding and then resolving differences. In the debrief, Dr. Rosenberg states:

"Much of our oppression in relationships comes from saying to people 'I want you to respect me, I want you to love me, I want you to understand me', without our being real clear about what we want when we say that".

Clarity, achieved through specificity is part of the moving forward process of any relationship that is conflicted.

¹Dr. Marshall Rosenberg (mediator, author and teacher) developed 'Nonviolent Communication' in the 1960s for supporting partnership and resolving conflict in relationships, and in society.

Start practicing specificity from today. Pay attention to when you are being specific or not being specific. Watch the news for the way journalists handle specificity in explaining an issue, or how interviewees trying to make a point use generalization rather than specificity. Have they got something to hide? To obfuscate? Are not clear about the issue themselves? Lack of sufficient specificity can result in being misinformed, or jumping to incorrect assumptions or unsubstantiated conclusions.

I have come to view being specific as an act of respect AND kindness to those we are communicating with. So, while I had not initially planned on ending on the note of kindness, I am happy to have landed here.

Learn More

At ThinkWell Training and Facilitation, we delve into how this small change in approaching issues can have a profound impact on clarity, understanding and decision making. In our Six Thinking Hats Training, as well as our Serious Creativity Training, we show how this can improve both critical thinking and creativity skills for leaders and teams.

If you are interested to learn more, check out the 6-minute explainer video on the [Six Thinking Hats Methodology](#). Additionally, you can find the '[Do You Love Me](#)' video by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg on YouTube as well.

Let us know what your learning needs are and how we can help. We are happy to explore training and facilitation options that would fit your team and situation.

Mahmuda Ali

Contact: 780-710-8511

E-mail: mahmuda.ali3@gmail.com

Lesley Dyck

Contact: 778-516-1514

E-mail: lesley@lesleydyck.ca



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