



Mindful Talk™

*A Pathway Through
Difficult Conversations*

Essential mindsets and skills for conducting
difficult conversations and
leading collaboration





MINDFUL TALK™: A Pathway Through Difficult Conversations

What is Mindful Talk?

Mindful Talk™ is a communications approach specifically designed for expressing complex or difficult messages by using “clean” language to evoke *collaboration* rather than *compliance*, *proaction* rather than *reaction*, and *agility* rather than *rigidity*. The result – highly resilient work partnerships that cultivate stable work processes and generate more consistent results.

What does it mean to bring mindfulness to communication? Mindfulness refers to *the ability to place your mind on what is happening in the moment, to pay attention without judgment*. This skill is critical for leaders so they can take in the full spectrum of information in a given work situation and respond appropriately right in that moment. Mindful communication rests on the principle of wholeness, of cultivating awareness of everything present, so as to speak cleanly, without covert messages shadowing your conversation.

Why should you care?

We live and work in the midst of information overload and seemingly endless vehicles for transferring that information, e.g., phone, email, voicemail, text, social media, messaging apps, and collaboration platforms. With so many channels, communication with our colleagues can easily be misheard, misconstrued, or missed entirely. Additionally, our facial expressions, body language and tone of voice influence the meaning people make of our words. The ability to collaborate with others only works when there’s congruence between what we say and what people see and hear.

Leading with *Mindful Talk*

The ability to work well with others, handle pressure, and direct employees in task planning and execution – these are all related to whether the language you use is congruent with the messages people pick up. Failure to be thoughtful and strategic with your speech generates confusion, often followed by resentment, resistance, or apathy. When we habitually speak *without* mindful attention, or ‘mindlessly,’ we create an environment of uncertainty or mistrust. If you’re a leader with influence and power, it’s a huge pitfall. Speaking ‘mindfully’ – using language free from emotional triggers, ambiguous tones, or veiled meanings – results in more clarity and efficiency in situations where you depend on others to get the job done.

Mindful communication rests on the principle of wholeness, of cultivating awareness of everything present, so no covert messages shadow your conversation.



Conversations and 'The Shadow'

All collaborative action is made up of thousands of conversations. And many conversations are imbued with emotionally evocative language or unconscious body language.

Although there's plenty of content available about the art of conversation in the workplace, the practice of *Mindful Talk* is a little different. It integrates what we've learned about emotional intelligence and mindfulness with the concept of 'the shadow' so we can become more mindful of what we are communicating.

When we speak about 'shadow' we mean the parts of our personalities that we've learned to hide, reject or repress in order to be accepted by others and effective in our own lives. This includes both the bad or 'dark' stuff as well as good qualities we possess. A common experience many of us have had is being taught early on that showing anger toward others is unacceptable or bad. We'd repress our angry thoughts and feelings. They'd *'go into shadow'* where we'd lose touch with them. Consequently, we'd also lose the ability to control how those thoughts and feelings affected our behavior. When this happens the 'shadowed' or repressed behavior could leak out and hijack a conversation. We've all been there – the meeting that goes drastically wrong when a previously unspoken harsh opinion slips out, the painful silence that follows, and the awkward attempts to rebound and bring the discussion back on track.



EXAMPLE: A senior leader in a strategy meeting is becoming increasingly frustrated because people in the meeting don't seem to be grasping the larger implications of the issue at hand. After trying his best to accept and legitimize the ideas that fail to hit the mark, he finally says abruptly, and in a very controlled and tight voice, *"That's enough for today. Let's end this meeting early."* He then walks out. What is communicated? Do people know he's angry? Likely. Do they feel safe to offer ideas the next time?



When we split off or deny parts of ourselves, it warps our perception of what's happening in the moment. For leaders the problem then becomes failing to see the information, cues and clues to possible solutions and losing opportunities for valuable generative collaboration.

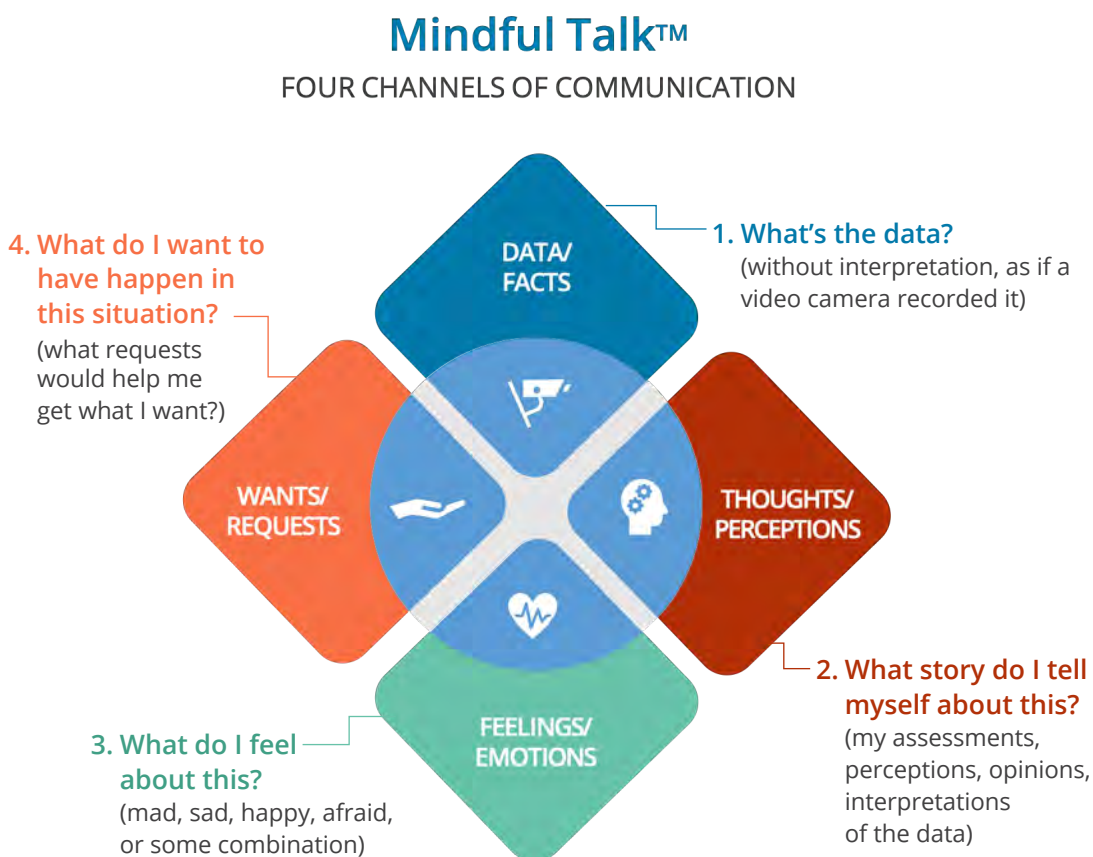


Four Channels of Communication

Present and active in any complex discussion are multiple channels of communication. By 'channels' we mean the conduits through which information is transmitted by the speaker and processed by the receiver. In human communication there are four channels: *Data*, *Thoughts*, *Feelings*, and *Wants*. Transmissions run through each of these channels and are perceived by others, whether we intend them to be or not. We read body language, we hear tones of voice, and we sense others' feeling states. When messages communicated through these four channels aren't congruent. For example, I say I'm not sad, but my tone of voice and my face say something different. In the face of the mismatched messages, people construct their own stories about what's happening.

Being aware of and explicitly addressing these four channels when you speak minimizes interpretive error and helps avoid defensive responses. In this way, *Mindful Talk* sets the environment for more transparency and clarity in your leadership.

HOW IT WORKS





When to Use Mindful Talk

Not every situation requires this level of attention to all channels. Routine, simple discussions and casual conversations often don't demand such mindful attention. However, training yourself in *Mindful Talk* can prepare you to handle complex or difficult conversations as they arise.

Use *Mindful Talk* when you're...

- ▶ *...feeling anxious about talking to someone, e.g., when admitting to a mistake*
- ▶ *...discussing a topic with high emotional complexity and a lot at stake, e.g., a business reorg*
- ▶ *...in a meeting where it's important for your message to be heard clearly and unambiguously, e.g., why you're merging functions and roles*
- ▶ *...anticipating that a situation requires a calming and grounding influence, e.g., loss of revenue*
- ▶ *...expecting that a colleague won't want to hear what you have to say, e.g., difficult feedback*





Definitions of the Four Channels

DATA / FACTS



This channel refers to the exact events, behaviors or words in a situation. It's the factual evidence that you can clearly describe, as if a video camera had recorded it. Data or facts may be one of the few things people agree on in a conversation. Almost everything else is subjective, open to interpretation. In order for people to evaluate or agree with the data, or propose other options, it's critical as a leader to provide the data that informs your point of view. Data is objective, opinion-neutral, and verifiable. It can be discussed, clarified and understood for what it is.

EXAMPLE: *"It looks like, from our notes, that we've had nine different ideas for how to approach this issue. Would you say that's accurate?"*



THOUGHTS / JUDGMENTS



This channel carries your assessments, critical judgments, perceptions, opinions or beliefs – it's what you find yourself thinking in response to the data. People come to the workplace with an infinite variety of experiences in life, diverse lenses through which they interpret data or facts. So what one person sees as a healthy delicious meal of cabbage and boiled potatoes, another would find completely distasteful. What one person sees as a reasonable budget surplus, another sees as an inefficient work process. Different assessments of the same data

Unfortunately, we often speak as if our points of view, opinions or experience are fact or *the* truth. When a colleague's interpretation of the data is different, and a leader speaks as if their perception is truth or fact, and, it can shut down the open flow of information. The key is to own our perceptions and opinions, as just that, our *own interpretation* of the facts.

EXAMPLE: *"From my perspective, these ideas are great tactical solutions, yet really won't get us a breakthrough on the larger issue. Anyone have a question about what I mean by that?"*



EMOTIONS / FEELINGS

Simply put, emotions are a physiological response, a series of electrical charges and chemical impulses in the body. They are hard-wired in our neurochemistry as a life-saving alert mechanism to tell us when we're in danger, and to prepare a response. This alert system is ancient and very efficient, and is responsible for our survival and dominance as a species.



But, we no longer live on the savannah in a heightened state of fear, when our brain would trigger our heart to pump more blood to our leg muscles so we can run from a threatening foe.

Yet our biology works in exactly the same way to protect us from what we interpret to be a threat to our survival in the modern world. The fear of rejection can set our heart racing or our stomach cramping. The anticipation of giving a speech to 100 people can create anxiety and panic and is, to our brain, no different than a lion chase across the African plains.



These biochemical responses, what we know as our feelings, are with us always. What's remarkable is that for so long it was believed that these had no place in working life. Yet without them, we couldn't make clear decisions, couldn't empathize, couldn't project into the future. They're our thinking brain's partner and guide, not something apart from ourselves that we can disregard. As such, they infuse our thoughts and speech. People pick up signals of fear, anger, sadness or joy, even when we think we're concealing them. In this channel of communication it's best to indicate the state of your emotions as they impact or are affected by the situation. The key is to recognize your feeling state and to own it. Better to acknowledge emotions, cleanly and lightly, and offer them as part of your communication. Otherwise, you leave others to make their own meaning and draw speculative conclusions.

EXAMPLE: *"Okay. I'm feeling concern about whether we'll get to our relaunch goal if we don't break through this tactical level and find a more system-wide solution."*

We're not thinking beings who feel.

We're feeling beings who think.

- from the BBC documentary, *"The Secret Life of the Brain"*



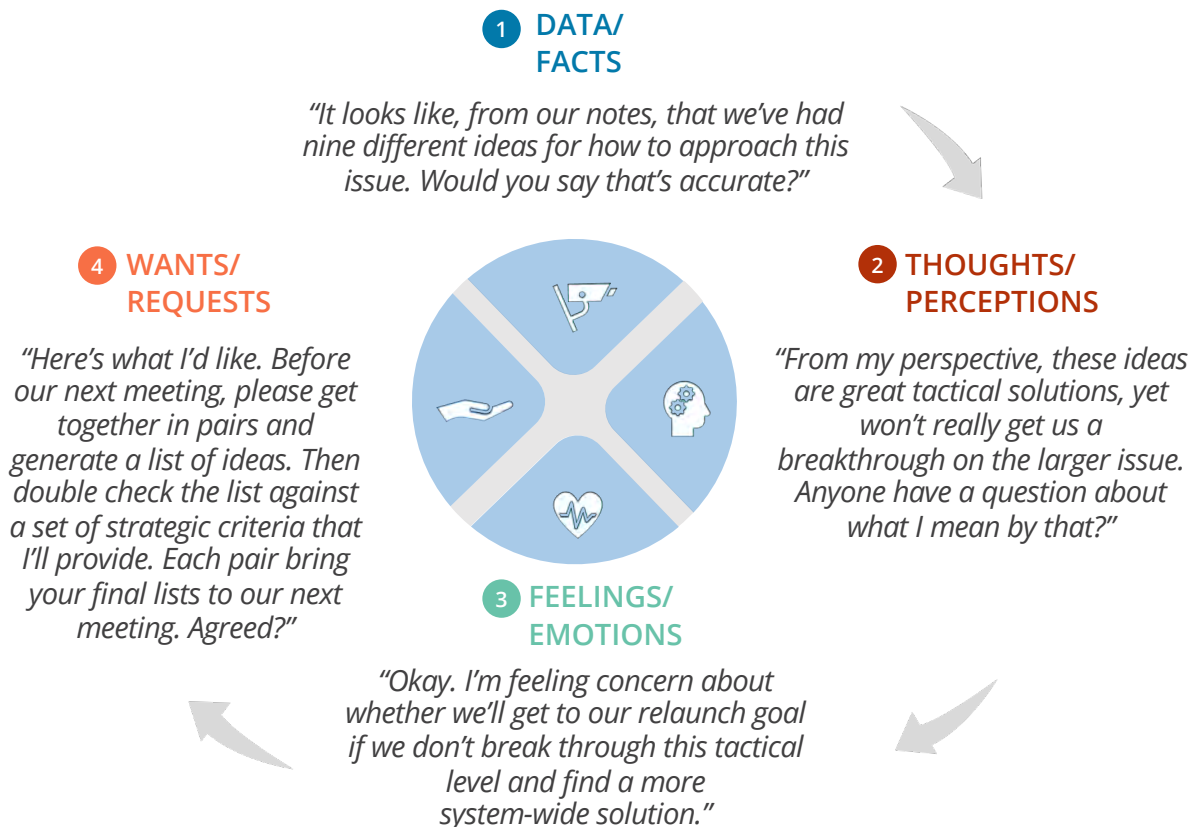
WANTS / REQUESTS



The Wants/Requests channel (or what is sometimes referred to in modern parlance as 'an ask') ties these three other channels together (Data, Thoughts, and Feelings). This is what you want or would like for yourself or your team. Expressing what you want gives listeners a better understanding of what action could be taken to satisfy your issues or concerns. It also indicates you're willing to take responsibility for engaging in resolution rather than just complaining or blaming. It does *not* carry with it, however, any guarantee that you will actually get what you want. It's simply the expression of the want. The more measurable and specific you can be in describing what you want, the better chance you'll have of getting it.

EXAMPLE: *"Here's what I'd like. Before our next meeting, please get together in pairs and generate a list of ideas. Then double check the list against a set of strategic criteria that I'll provide. Each pair bring your final lists to our next meeting. Agreed?"*

Putting It All Together – Our Example



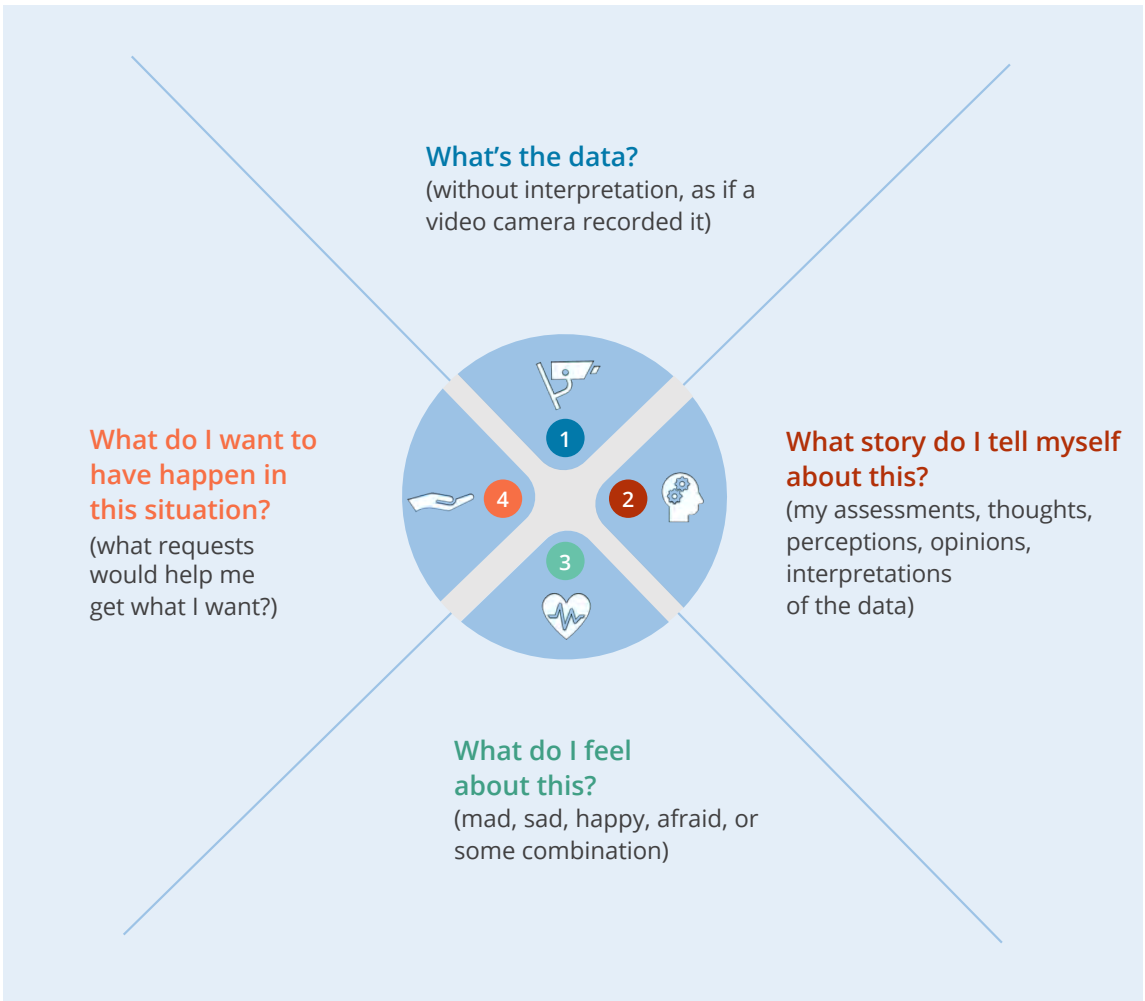


Mindful Talk™ Worksheet

Use the following template to plan what you're going to say when faced with a difficult situation. Spending a few minutes ahead of time will help you be more mindful when having challenging conversations. Especially when assessing the situation or planning what you want to say, you can start in any of the four quadrants. The more you practice, the more speaking mindfully will become both natural and habitual.

(See page 12 for a fillable PDF worksheet)

PRACTICAL APPLICATION



"We had the experience but missed the meaning."

– from *"The Dry Salvages"* in
T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*



Summary

We've discussed the reasons why *Mindful Talk* is a needed and valuable skill for leaders.

We've also outlined the foundation of *Mindful Talk*: the integration of two core ideas about how human beings process information, *mindfulness* and *the shadow*, and how they can be applied for clean, effective speaking.

At this point you might be wondering: *Why these four channels? Why not other key communication criteria?*

Mindful Talk employs a particular type of lens, one that sees human systems as made up of archetypal behavior. The word 'archetype' actually means *ancient patterns*. We know from studying history, indigenous myths, cultural legends, and other social sciences that patterns of behavior persist across culture and time regardless of ethnicity, race or nationality. These four channels represent a set of fundamental archetypes or energies that we all share as humans (sometimes labeled as Warrior, Lover, Sovereign, and Magician). And because of this, they provide us a very useful perspective into what works and doesn't as humans interact with each other, whether in pairs, small groups or across organizations. *Mindful Talk* applies this archetypal lens to the realm of communication and collaboration.

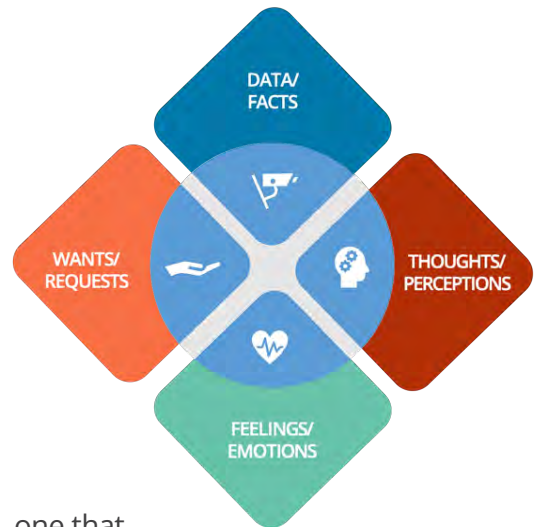
What's Next?

Becoming more conscious of how you speak is an important next step. But it's not enough to simply understand this concept intellectually. It only works when we develop in parallel our skill at paying attention and being mindful of the dynamics going on inside our own minds and bodies. It takes discernment to see a set of data, and then to distinguish it from our interpretation of that data. It takes awareness to know what we're feeling and be able to convey this without charge or blame. And it takes training of the mind to uncover what we really want despite all the static interference generated by difficult circumstances.

How do we do become more aware? The same way we would develop any muscle or skill – training and practice. In this case brain training, or what Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the *Stress Reduction Program* at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, calls *mindfulness* – *the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.*

Mindful Talk™

FOUR CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION





What's Next? (*continued*)

And he should know. MBSR has a long track record of scientific data showing how secular mindfulness practices have supported the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of people world-wide. It only makes sense to extend this skill at awareness and paying attention into how we speak and relate to those important to our success and well-being.

If this idea of *Mindful Talk* has piqued your interest, we invite you to learn more about applying it, including:

- ▶ Common *mis-speaks* in each channel and how they tangle our message
- ▶ What the key *feeling states* look like and how to address them when they show up in yourself or others
- ▶ How our brains track *threat and reward*, and why this matters when we speak and act to lead others
- ▶ How *Mindful Talk* reduces stress, both within the speaker *and* the listeners
- ▶ How to use the four archetypes to *assess* a complex situation and plan what to do to address the issues
- ▶ How to learn *mindfulness practices* to support your success and well-being

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Susan DeGenring is a leadership coach, strategist and collaboration consultant. She is the founder of *StillMind Coaching Solutions*. She facilitates the development of versatile, strategic, emotionally intelligent leaders.

TO FIND OUT MORE, PLEASE CONTACT US AT:



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Mindful Talk™ Worksheet (Fillable PDF)

Use the following worksheet to think through and plan what you're going to say when faced with a difficult situation. When assessing a situation or planning what you're going to say, start in any of the four quadrants.

