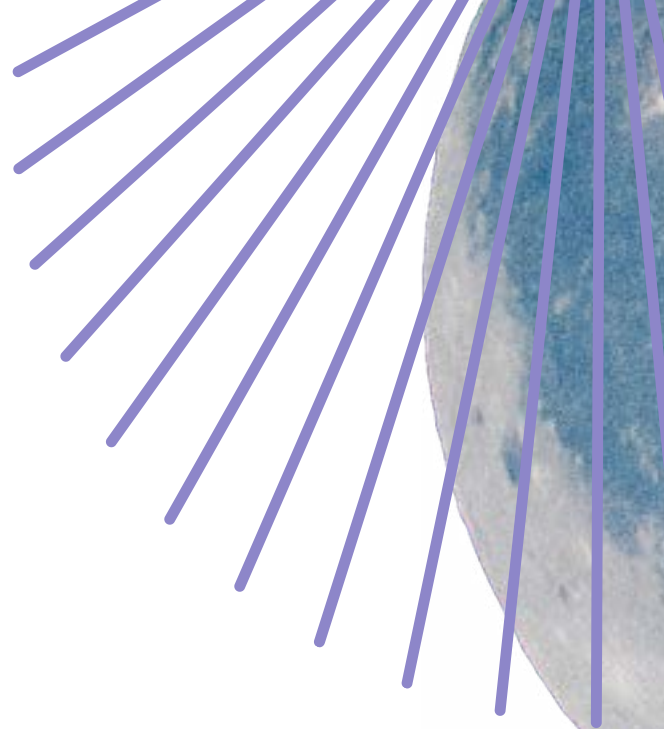
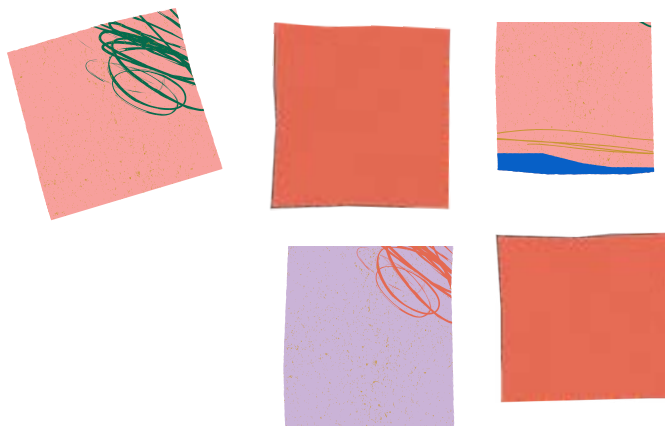




Working Through Tension

**Practical Tools for Communication,
Conflict, and Collegiality**



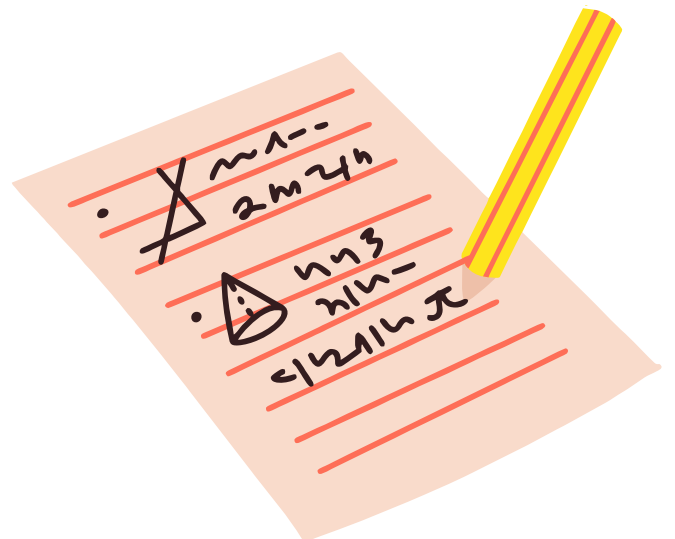
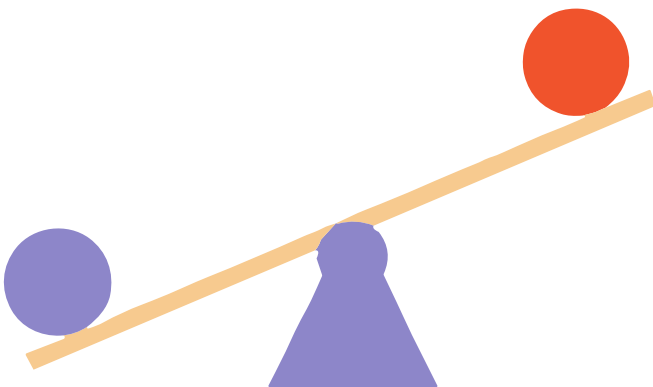
Not a formula

Most communication advice assumes everyone is on equal footing.

We're not.

How a message lands depends on who holds power in the exchange — positional, relational, or social. The same sentence from a manager and from a peer is not the same sentence.

Today isn't about communicating "more professionally." It's about communicating in a way that accounts for the real dynamics in the room.



HOW A MESSAGE TRAVELS

A message rarely lands the way it leaves.



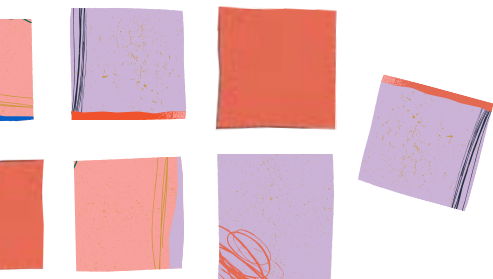
As it moves down (leadership → staff): it can pick up weight it wasn't meant to carry. A casual "can we revisit this?" from a director can read as a mandate.



As it moves up (staff → leadership): it can get softened, hedged, or swallowed. People edit themselves when speaking to power.



As it moves across (team → team): it loses context. What's obvious in one unit is invisible to another.



INTENT VS. IMPACT

What you meant and what landed are two different things.

INTENT — what you were trying to do.

IMPACT — what the other person actually experienced.

INTENT	IMPACT
"I was just being direct."	They felt dismissed.
"I was giving them space."	They felt abandoned.
"I was protecting the team."	They felt left out of a decision.

GENEROUS AUTHORITY

Power in a conversation isn't something to hide or apologize for. It's something to **use on behalf of others**.

Using authority generously means:

- Naming the dynamic instead of pretending it isn't there
- Making the implicit explicit ("This is a suggestion, not a directive")
- Protecting the people with less power in the exchange
- Creating room for honesty rather than assuming silence means agreement



Priya Parker
The Art of Gathering

SMALL LEVERS, REAL SHIFTS

Small levers that change how communication lands:

- **Who speaks first** — leaders speaking last leaves room for honesty
- **How you ask** — "What am I missing?" invites more than "Any questions?"
- **Naming your intent** — saying why you're communicating, not just what
- **The follow-up** — checking what landed, not assuming it landed right

Susie Wise
Design for Belonging

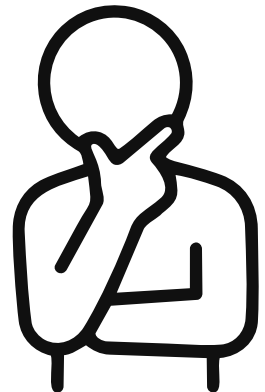


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LET'S PRACTICE!

You'll work through a cross-role communication moment in small groups — using intent vs. impact and the levers we just covered. Use these questions to support how to analyze each situation.

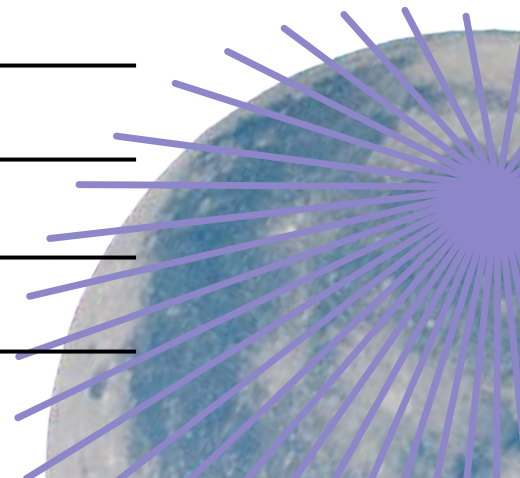


1. What was the *intent*?
2. What was the *impact*?
3. Where did the message shift as it traveled?
4. What's one lever that could have changed how it landed?
5. How would you reopen the conversation now?

SCENARIO A | THE REPLY-ALL THAT WASN'T MEANT TO STING

A senior leader sends a reply-all email responding to a staff member's proposal. **The leader writes: "I don't think we've fully thought this through — let's slow down before committing."** The leader means it as a normal note of caution and moves on with their day. But **the staff member who made the proposal spent two weeks on it and now feels publicly second-guessed in front of the whole team.** Over the next few days, that person stops volunteering ideas in meetings. A few others notice and become more cautious too. **The leader has no idea any of this happened.**

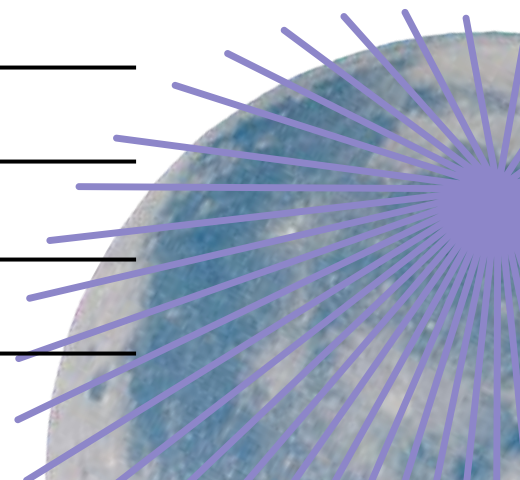
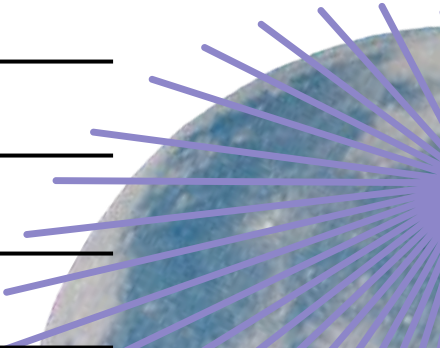
→ How did the "reply-all" format change the weight of the message? → If you were the leader and found out a week later, how would you reopen it?



SCENARIO B | LOST IN TRANSLATION BETWEEN TEAMS

Two teams are collaborating on a shared project. Team A sends Team B a message: "Can you get us the numbers when you have a chance?" **To Team A, this is urgent — they need it by end of day for a leadership update. To Team B, "when you have a chance" reads as low priority, so they slot it for next week.** The leadership update happens without the numbers. Team A is frustrated and feels let down. Team B is confused about why anyone is upset — they did exactly what was asked. Now there's quiet tension between the teams, and **each thinks the other dropped the ball.**

→ Where did context get lost as the message traveled across teams? → What's one lever that could have prevented the misfire? → How would you repair the tension between the teams now?



IT'S NOT IF THINGS GO SIDEWAYS... IT'S WHEN

It's vital to build up our relational skills for when we mess up. It makes all the difference when we acknowledge our part in a conflict and repair the ruptures in our working relationships.



RECAP: INTENT VS. IMPACT

What you meant and what landed are two different things.

INTENT — what you were trying to do. IMPACT — what the other person actually experienced.

INTENT	IMPACT
"I was just being direct."	They felt dismissed.
"I was giving them space."	They felt abandoned.
"I was protecting the team."	They felt left out of a decision.

WHAT IS ACCOUNTABILITY?

What is **accountability**? It's recognizing that in a community, all of us owe each other (and are owed) certain things, like **respect, dignity, and care**.

We are all humans and we all make mistakes, and part of accountability is trying to **make things right and repair relationships** after harm happens.

Accountability is **not punishment**. It is the ongoing practice of aligning actions with shared values.

REFLECTION:

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

When tension shows up — what's your first instinct?

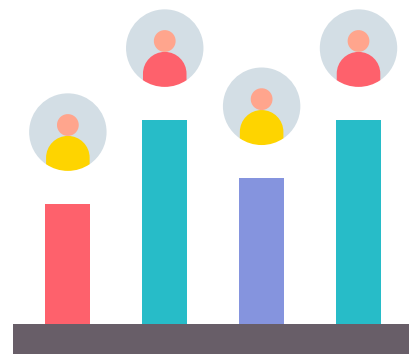
Fix it fast? Go quiet? Explain yourself? Why might you have done this in the past?

Journal



PATTERNS: RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

-  **Over-functioning:** Taking on too much responsibility for fixing the issue, smoothing things over, or managing everyone's feelings.
-  **Withdrawing:** Pulling back, going quiet, delaying the conversation, or hoping the tension resolves on its own.
-  **Deflecting:** Explaining, minimizing, blaming context, or focusing on intent instead of impact.



THE DO'S AND DON'TS TAKING OWNERSHIP

The formula:

Pause → Acknowledge → Name the impact → Repair → Follow Through

DON'T	DO
DEFLECT	GIVE A SPECIFIC APOLOGY
GET DEFENSIVE	MAKE SPACE TO LISTEN
IGNORE	RECONNECT

OWNERSHIP CAN FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE

Uncomfortable (*definition*) Encountering something unfamiliar, challenging, or new. It takes more effort to process — but we can still think and learn. Discomfort can be a space of growth.

Note: *Being uncomfortable is a natural state of being for your body. It is meant to alert you that something is happening; **pay attention.** Your somatic response to discomfort can be difficult, but it is important to acknowledge it and move through it to grow and strengthen your bonds.*



REPAIR & MOVING FORWARD

Individual repair fixes a moment. Structural repair fixes the conditions that produced it.

Conflict	Practice
Miscommunication	Clarify what was heard, what was meant, and what needs to happen next
Disempowerment	Revisit who was included, who had decision-making power, and what needs to be rebalanced
Dismissiveness	Name the impact, slow down, and make room for the person's concern or contribution
Overstepping	Acknowledge the boundary crossed and agree on decision rights going forward

LET'S PRACTICE!

Work through two moments where a conflict impacted a working relationship. Analyze the scenario and determine what steps to take toward accountability and repair.

Run the scenario through the formula:

1. **Pause** — what actually happened, before judgment?
2. **Acknowledge & name the impact** — what did the other person experience?
3. **Repair** — individual and structural: what apology, and what process or power needs to change?
4. **Follow through** — how would they know it was real?

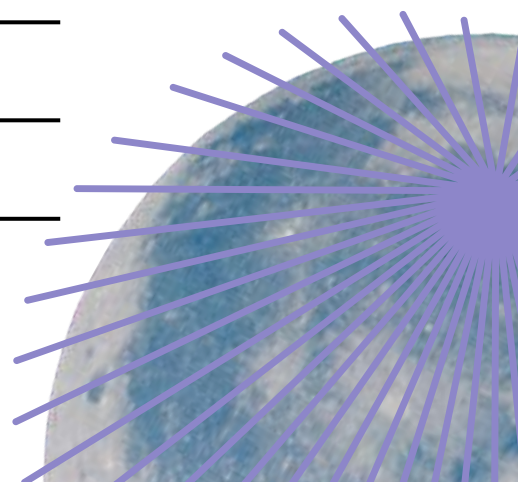
SCENARIO A | THE MISSED UPDATE

A project timeline changed after a leadership meeting. One team member knew about the shift but assumed others had also heard. A staff member continued working from the old timeline and later found out their work was no longer needed in the same way.

They feel embarrassed, frustrated, and left out of a decision that affected their labor

Consider:

Where did things go sideways?
What would ownership sound like?
What would help repair trust?



SCENARIO B | THE FAST EMAIL

After a stressful week, a supervisor sends a brief email: "This isn't what I asked for. Please revise before noon."

The sender meant to be efficient. The recipient experiences the message as dismissive and unclear, especially because they had put significant time into the draft.

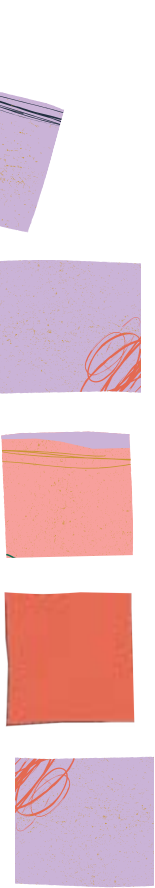
Consider:

- Where's the gap between intent and impact?
- Given the power difference, what does the supervisor owe here?
- What would let the recipient name the impact safely — and whose job is it to make that safe?

WHAT COULD BE THE WAY FORWARD?

- Putting these skills to use, what were some of the pathways forward you discovered?
- What felt difficult?





WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE TOMORROW

Accountability is a constant practice. It's not about getting it perfect, nor is it about aiming for a frictionless workplace. **Friction can often mean that there is deep care and commitment to the work.**

The key is how we use that energy and how we continue to work on and build resilient working relationships.

How do we do that? Center repair after rupture. Create space for ownership over mistakes. **Make the effort to close the gap between how we show up and the values we want to live by.**

JOURNAL: ONE SHIFT THIS WEEK

What's one thing you'll do differently to **close the gap** between how you show up and the **shared values** you hold for this department?
