

Green Light Ahead: When Words Drive Us Apart

Decoding Schulz von Thun's Four Sides of communication to understand better and communicate more effectively.



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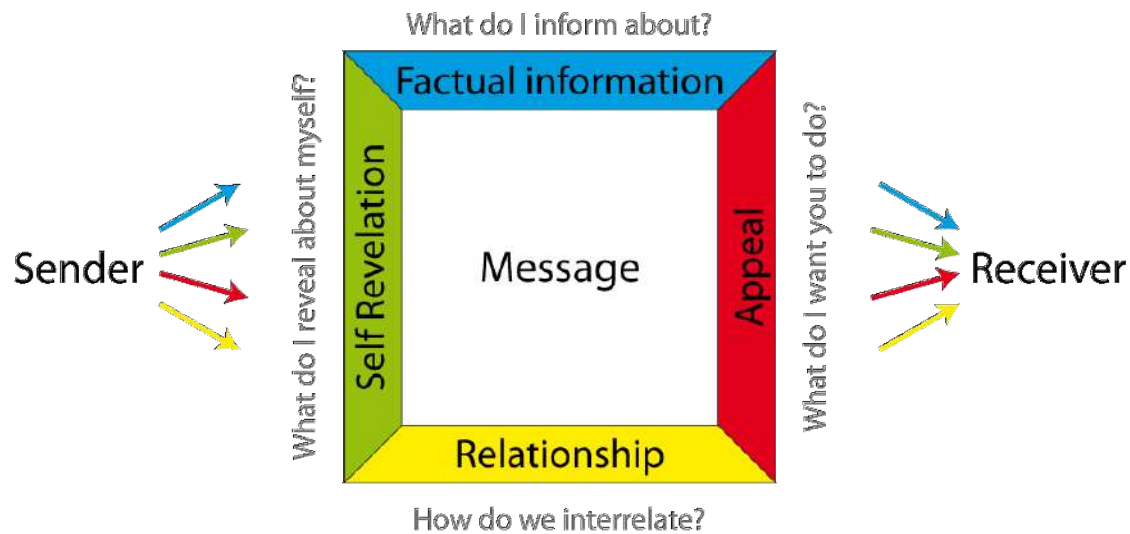
Who's Really Driving? The Hidden Lanes of Communication



In project management, effective communication is crucial for coordinating teams, aligning on tasks, and resolving issues promptly.

Messages in professional settings often carry multiple layers beyond just facts, such as personal feelings, relational dynamics, or implied actions. This can cause misunderstandings, escalate conflicts, and derail project timelines.

To analyse and improve, the Four-Sides Communication Model by Friedemann Schulz von Thun dissects messages into their four components, enabling better self-awareness, targeted responses, and conflict resolution in team communications.



Element	Explanation
Factual information	The objective information or data in the message, focusing on facts without emotional or relational overlay. In project contexts, this is the "what" – e.g., status updates or metrics.
Self-Revelation	What the sender unintentionally reveals about their own state, feelings, or personality. This layer exposes the speaker's inner world, like frustration or enthusiasm, which can influence team morale if overlooked.
Relationship	How the sender perceives or signals the relationship with the receiver, often through tone or phrasing. In projects, this can indicate trust, hierarchy, or respect issues, leading to defensiveness if misread.
Appeal	The intended action or influence on the receiver – what the sender wants them to do, think, or feel. This drives calls to action in management, such as urging faster progress, but can be seen as bossy if not clarified.

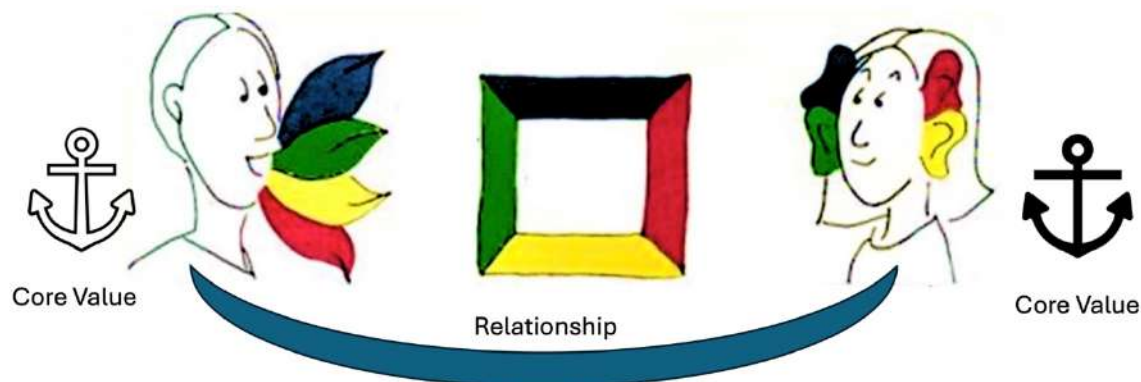
Since project managers communicate with individuals and groups, we will expand the model with

- stakeholders' **core values** (e.g., intrinsic motivators like autonomy, security, or innovation) as good as is known
- existing **relationships** (e.g., trust levels or power dynamics, informed by relational dialectics or social exchange theory), also as good as known



Message		
Sender		Receiver
Efficiency	Probable Core value	Autonomy
Feels superior	Probable Relationship	Feels dependant
Schultz von Thun		
Objective observation: The traffic light ahead is green, meaning it's time to go.	Factual	Hears as a factual prompt: "You're missing the obvious signal."
Reveals sender's awareness or helpfulness: "I'm attentive and trying to assist."	Self-Revelation	Perceives impatience: "You're restless and annoyed with the wait."
Cues partnership: "We're in this drive together, and I'm supporting you."	Relationship	Interprets as criticism: "You're not competent or alert enough as the driver."
Intended call: "Notice the light and proceed safely."	Appeal	Feels like a command: "Hurry up and drive better, or I'll take over."

Interlude: Schultz von Thun expanded



Core values

Core values act as "filters" that colour how each of the four sides is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver. For instance, if a stakeholder values stability (e.g., job security), they might mis-interpret an appeal layer as threatening, even if the sender intends it as motivational.

Misalignments arise when values clash, leading to distortions like projection bias (assuming the sender shares your values).

Example in Car Scenario: The man's core value might be efficiency (hating delays), so his factual observation ("The light is green") reveals impatience (self-revelation) and appeals for action. The woman, valuing autonomy (control over driving), mis-interprets the relationship layer as belittling, escalating to defensiveness.

Existing relationships

Existing relationships provide the "backdrop" for the four sides—high-trust relationships buffer misinterpretations (e.g., appeals feel supportive), while strained ones amplify them (e.g., relationship cues turn critical).

Low-trust relationships foster confirmation bias, where receivers selectively hear negative layers (e.g., ignoring facts to focus on implied criticism).

Example in Car Scenario: If the couple has a history of collaborative driving (strong relationship), the man's remark might be heard as helpful teamwork. But if there's underlying tension (e.g., past arguments about control), it mis-interprets as micromanaging, highlighting the relationship layer's volatility.

Project Examples

Vision Statement for a Project Solving an Organizational Problem

"We will streamline processes to eliminate inefficiencies that have held us back."		
Board		Employees
Survival and growth of the company	Probable Core value	Work for career or a living
We strategize they execute	Probable Relationship	They define and decide
Schulz		
Processes are inefficient and need improvement to move forward.	Factual	Hears as a factual indictment: "Our current work is flawed and causing problems."
Reveals sender's optimism or strategic focus: "I'm committed to bettering the organization."	Self-Revelation	Perceives sender's dissatisfaction: "They're unhappy with us and our efforts."
Cues collaborative inclusion: "We're in this together as a team."	Relationship	Interprets as blame: "You're the ones holding us back, implying incompetence."
Intended call: "Join in making positive changes for efficiency."	Appeal	Feels like an accusation: "Fix your mistakes or face consequences."

Vision Statement for an Efficiency Improvement Project

"We aim to optimize operations for maximum productivity and cost savings."		
Board		Employees
Survival and growth of the company	Probable Core value	Work for career or a living
We strategize they execute	Probable Relationship	They define and decide
Schulz		
Focus on enhancing productivity and reducing costs through optimization.	Factual	Hears as a stark reality: "Cuts are coming, and jobs may be at risk."
Reveals sender's pragmatism: "I'm focused on sustainability and long-term success."	Self-Revelation	Perceives anxiety or cold calculation: "They're worried about profits over people."

Cues shared responsibility: "This benefits everyone in the organization."	Relationship	Interprets as detachment: "Your roles are expendable for the bottom line."
Intended call: "Support these efforts for a stronger, more efficient future."	Appeal	Feels like a threat: "Adapt or risk being let go in the name of savings."

Project Manager Creating Estimates and a Plan Without Consulting Experts

"Based on my analysis, the timeline is 6 months with these milestones."		
Project manager		Specialist
I need to plan in detail	Probable Core value	I know
I am the boss	Probable Relationship	The PM is not my actual boss
	Schulz	
Objective outline: A proposed 6-month timeline with specific milestones.	Factual	Hears as imposed facts: "This is set in stone, ignoring our input."
Reveals sender's confidence: "I've thoughtfully analyzed this for the project's benefit."	Self-Revelation	Perceives overconfidence: "They're arrogant, thinking they know better than us."
Cues leadership: "I'm guiding the team with my expertise."	Relationship	Interprets as dismissal: "Your expertise isn't valued or needed here."
Intended call: "Align with this plan to move forward efficiently."	Appeal	Feels like a directive: "Accept this without question, or be seen as obstructive."

How to apply Schultz in Project management communications

In project management, PMs must navigate complex stakeholder communications where contexts, relationships, and core values influence how messages are sent and received, often leading to misalignments if not systematically a structured approach, PMs may overlook stakeholder contexts (e.g., pressures or backgrounds), current relationships (e.g., trust levels), or core values (e.g., innovation vs. stability), resulting in messages that are misinterpreted across Schulz von Thun's layers, exacerbating conflicts. Question

What can the PM do??

This 4-step process is tailored for PMs, emphasizing practical application in scenarios like vision statements or planning. It differentiates sender (often the PM) and receiver (stakeholders) viewpoints while ensuring core values guide the analysis. Apply it iteratively for ongoing refinement.

Schultz von Thun in communication planning	
Step 1:	Analyse Stakeholders and Realize Their Contexts and Current Relationships
Step 2:	Analyse Their Core Values
Step 3:	Build the 3-Column Analysis Regarding the Message the Analysis of Both Sides
Step 4:	Rebuild the Message

Step 1: Analyse Stakeholders and Realize Their Contexts and Current Relationships

As the PM, map out key stakeholders involved in the communication, assessing their individual contexts (e.g., role pressures, cultural factors) and the current relationship dynamics (e.g., collaborative, hierarchical, or strained) to set the foundation for value-aligned messaging.

Step 2: Analyse Their Core Values

Building on Step 1, identify and prioritize core values for both sender (your own as PM, e.g., efficiency) and receivers (e.g., autonomy for teams), exploring how these values intersect or conflict within the communication context.

Step 3: Build the 3-Column Analysis Regarding the Message and the Analysis of Both Sides

Construct a 3-column table for the message using Schulz von Thun's elements (factual content, self-revelation, relationship, appeal), analysing from both sender's intentions and receiver's perceptions, incorporating contexts, relationships, and core values from prior steps.

Message		
Sender		Receiver
..	Probable core values	..
..	Probable Relationship	..
Schultz von Thun		
..	Factual	..
..	Self-Revelation	..
..	Relationship	..
..	Appeal	..

Step 4: Rebuild the Message

Synthesize insights from Steps 1-3 to reconstruct the message with balanced layers, ensuring it respects core values, contexts, and relationships for both sides, then test by reapplying the 3-column analysis.

Appendix: detailed process steps

Step 1: Analyse Stakeholders and Realize Their Contexts and Current Relationships

As the PM, map out key stakeholders involved in the communication, assessing their individual contexts (e.g., role pressures, cultural factors) and the current relationship dynamics (e.g., collaborative, hierarchical, or strained) to set the foundation for value-aligned messaging.

Sub-Action	Description	Example for PM
Identify Stakeholders	List senders/receivers and their roles.	For a vision statement: Sender (PM), Receivers (team members, executives).
Assess Contexts	Evaluate external/internal factors like deadlines or past interactions.	Team under deadline stress; executives focused on ROI.
Evaluate Relationships	Gauge trust, power balance, or history.	Strong with team (collaborative) but formal with executives (hierarchical).
Output	A stakeholder map highlighting contexts and relationships.	Informs how messages might land differently.

Step 2: Analyse Their Core Values

Building on Step 1, identify and prioritize core values for both sender (your own as PM, e.g., efficiency) and receivers (e.g., autonomy for teams), exploring how these values intersect or conflict within the communication context.

Sub-Action	Description	Example for PM
List Core Values	Document values for each stakeholder from observations or feedback.	PM values: Accountability, innovation. Team values: Work-life balance, recognition.
Explore Intersections	Note alignments (e.g., shared focus on quality) and clashes (e.g., PM's urgency vs. team's deliberation).	Alignment: All value project success; Clash: PM's results-focus may seem dismissive.
Link to Relationships	Tie values to current dynamics from Step 1.	Strained relationships may stem from unaddressed value mismatches.
Output	A value alignment chart for sender and receivers.	Guides sensitive layering in messages.

Step 3: Build the 3-Column Analysis Regarding the Message and the Analysis of Both Sides

Construct a 3-column table for the message using Schulz von Thun's elements (factual content, self-revelation, relationship, appeal), analysing from both sender's intentions and receiver's perceptions, incorporating contexts, relationships, and core values from prior steps.

Sub-Action	Description	Example for PM
Perform Sender Analysis	Detail intentions per element, reflecting PM's core values.	Self-Revelation: Reveals PM's value of efficiency.
Perform Receiver Analysis	Predict perceptions, factoring in their values and relationship dynamics.	Relationship: May feel undervalued if autonomy is core.
Output	Completed 3-column table highlighting gaps.	Reveals misalignments for targeted fixes.

Step 4: Rebuild the Message

Synthesize insights from Steps 1-3 to reconstruct the message with balanced layers, ensuring it respects core values, contexts, and relationships for both sides, then test by reapplying the 3-column analysis.

Sub-Action	Description	Example for PM
Reconstruct Layers	Rewrite with clear facts, positive self-revelation, supportive relationships, and collaborative appeals.	Revised: "Based on our shared goals (values), let's refine the 6-month timeline together (relationship)."
Incorporate Values/Contexts	Align with receiver values (e.g., include recognition) and contexts (e.g., acknowledge pressures).	Soften appeals to build on current relationships.
Validate	Re-run Step 3's table on the new message.	Ensure reduced perception gaps.
Output	Final rebuilt message ready for use.	Enhances clarity and stakeholder buy-in.