

# Mindful Communication

How to engage in conversations with greater presence, focus and clarity



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# Hello, I'm Vesna,

Have you ever found yourself responding to a colleague without fully grasping the conversation because you were overwhelmed with emails and other tasks? Or maybe you've reacted quickly to someone's remarks, only to later wish you had taken more time to consider your response? How often do you struggle to maintain focus in a discussion, with your thoughts drifting off to different concerns? It's worth considering how these patterns of impatience and distraction might be affecting not just your work relationships but also your personal connections.

In my experience as a Mindfulness Trainer, many clients have faced similar challenges. These habits, seemingly small at first, can lead to larger issues in both personal and professional realms. My clients sought help to cultivate greater focus, calm, and emotional intelligence in their interactions. That's where the practice of mindful communication comes in.

Hello, I'm Vesna, a certified Mindfulness Trainer with nearly a decade of experience in this field. I've been teaching both individuals and groups across various companies, organizations, and institutions worldwide. While 'mindfulness' has become a trendy term, often thrown around in social media hashtags like #BePresent or #LiveInTheMoment, its real depth is much more significant and applicable to our daily lives than many realize.

It's not just a trendy concept; it has practical relevance in both our personal and professional lives. In this talk, we'll dive into how mindful communication can transform your ability to stay focused and composed in conversations and simultaneously improve your social-emotional skills, allowing you to better self-regulate and understand others' perspectives.

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# In this talk, we'll explore:

- The Basics of Mindful Communication: What it is and why it matters in the workplace.
- The main elements that make up mindful communication.
- Identifying what gets in the way of mindful communication.
- Real examples and exercises to apply these concepts.

**So let's embark on this journey of understanding and mindful communication together.**



# What is Mindful Communication



# To understand what Mindful Communication is, let's start first with defining what mindfulness is.

A simple definition of Mindfulness from Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program is: **"paying attention to the present moment nonjudgmentally."**

*Mindful Communication, therefore, involves applying this practice of mindfulness to our interactions and relationships with others.*

## **Let's contrast this with what often happens in regular communication:**

Imagine a scenario with Tom, an IT project manager, who is often caught up in the autopilot reactive mode of communication. During a critical team meeting, one of his team members, Nadia, brings up a potential issue with the project timeline. Tom, while simultaneously checking his emails and thinking about his next meeting, thinking that he is being productive, quickly dismisses Nadia's concern without fully

absorbing the details. His response is a habitual "We'll deal with it later," not truly engaging with the specific concerns Nadia raised. This lack of attentive listening and immediate, unconsidered reply leads to overlooking a critical issue that later escalates, causing project delays and increased team tension.

If Tom had utilised mindful communication, the scenario would have played out differently. Upon Nadia raising the concern, he would have paused his email checking, directed his full attention to her, and actively listened to understand the depth of the issue. He would have acknowledged her concern, asked clarifying questions, and discussed potential solutions, or at least assured her of revisiting the issue with the attention it deserved. This mindful approach would not only have prevented the project delay but also would have built trust and respect within the team, showing that he values their input and is genuinely engaged in the project's success.

## **Now let's look at another example of Reactive Communication:**

Consider a scenario involving Derek, a software team lead, who often falls into the trap of reactive communication, especially under stress. In a meeting, his team presents a new approach that deviates from the original plan. Feeling the pressure of deadlines and unprepared for the change, Derek quickly reacts with frustration. He sharply criticizes the idea, dismissing it without fully understanding the reasoning behind it. His response, driven by impatience and stress, shuts down further discussion and leaves his team feeling demoralized and hesitant to share innovative ideas in the future.

If Derek had approached the situation with mindful communication, the outcome would have been more positive. On hearing the new approach, instead of immediately reacting, he would take a moment to manage his initial impulse of frustration. He would listen to his team's

idea with patience and openness, considering the potential benefits of their approach. Even if he had reservations, he would express them respectfully, encouraging a dialogue to understand better and evaluate the idea in more detail. This empathetic and respectful communication style would foster a supportive team environment, encouraging creativity and collaboration, and making team members feel valued and heard.

So let's conclude! What is mindful communication? Mindful communication involves engaging in conversations with full attention, intention, and empathy. It enhances both professional and personal interactions by promoting focus and presence. This approach builds stronger, more meaningful relationships and fosters empathy, leading to more thoughtful responses and less impulsivity. It also reduces prejudices, respects differences, and creates a more inclusive and genuine interaction environment.

# Key components of mindful communication

To clarify it better, I've highlighted the key components essential in practicing mindful communication. Let's explore these components in more depth to understand the advantages they offer in everyday communication.

- **First component is Presence and Focus:** Presence and focus refer to the ability to be fully attentive and engaged in the moment during a conversation. It means paying complete attention to the speaker, not just to the words being said but also to non-verbal cues like tone and body language.

*This improves insight, reduces misunderstandings, and builds stronger relationships. In a world of constant distractions, showing genuine focus and presence is essential for fostering trust and respect.*

- **Second component is Non-Judgment and Active Listening:** Non-judgment involves listening to others without jumping to conclusions or allowing personal biases to color your interpretation. Active listening is a deeper level of listening where you're not only hearing the words but also understanding the emotions and intentions behind them.

*In communication, this component fosters openness, deepens empathy, and facilitates effective problem-solving by ensuring all perspectives are considered.*

- **Third component is Self-Regulation and Empathy:** Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage your own emotional responses, particularly in high-stress or emotionally charged situations. Empathy is the capacity to understand and share the feelings of another person, putting yourself in their shoes.

*This helps prevent conflict escalation, creates a supportive and empathetic environment, and improves teamwork and collaboration in the workplace.*

Each of these components plays a crucial role in fostering effective and meaningful communication. In a tech workspace, where communication challenges are unique and varied, these skills are especially valuable in maintaining a harmonious and productive environment.



# Obstacles to mindful communication

**These obstacles typically fall into three main categories:**

I recognize that while the concept of mindful communication is positive and empowering, implementing it can be challenging, especially in tech-related environments where these challenges are often more pronounced. To address these issues effectively and understand them from various perspectives, let's examine the obstacles we encounter closely. Awareness of these barriers allows us to identify and implement appropriate solutions and strategies more effectively.

*By identifying and understanding the specific barriers to mindful communication, you gain insight into your personal challenges in this area. This awareness allows you to strategically focus on key areas: modifying environmental factors like reducing external distractions, developing empathy and an appreciation for diverse perspectives among global colleagues, or refining your personal habits. Many of these obstacles can be effectively addressed through the upcoming exercises I'll introduce*

## **Environmental distractions:**

- Fast-paced work environment, which creates tension, stress and hinders mindful communication;
- Remote or distributed teams, where geographic and time zone differences limit real-time and in-person interactions;
- cultural differences in diverse workplaces, potentially leading to misunderstandings and communication gaps.

## **Technological distractions:**

- over-reliance on digital communication, causing personal disconnect and misunderstandings;
- use of technical terminology creating language barriers which might exclude colleagues not familiar with such language;
- challenges in virtual communication, where missing non-verbal cues hinder emotional and intentional understanding.

## **Personal factors:**

- Multitasking, leading to reduced presence;
- Lack of Training in Soft Skills: A focus on technical skills at the expense of soft skills like communication and empathy can hinder effective interaction.
- Person's High Workload causes stress which can diminish mental clarity and the capacity to communicate effectively.

# how can we practice mindful communication?

**Let me introduce you to several exercises aimed at strengthening mindful communication which can be used in team meetings or individually.**

*These exercises are categorized into three key components: presence and focus, non-judgment and active listening, self-regulation and empathy.*





## Scenario I

Presence and focus stand as important elements of mindful communication, yet they are frequently undervalued and overlooked in many conversations, both in professional and personal settings. To illustrate the significance of this component, consider the following scenario:

*During a weekly software development team meeting, Anika presents an update on her project segment. However, her colleagues are largely distracted – some are checking emails, others are preparing for their updates, and a few are occupied with their phones. Consequently, they miss critical points about potential delays due to a technical issue that Anika highlights.*

*Two days later, this overlooked issue escalates, catching the team off guard. This results in a hasty and stressful effort to resolve the problem, a situation that could have been proactively managed with full attention during the meeting. This lack of focus not only leads to project delays but also heightens stress and frustration within the team.*

How can we prevent this from happening and be more present and focused in our communication?

## Mindful Listening Exercise:

### 1. Initiating the Session: A Minute of Silence

Purpose: To help participants recognize and accept their current mental state (stress, distractions, etc.).

Techniques:

- Focusing on breath.
- Noticing bodily sensations.
- Attuning to surrounding sounds.

Goal: Shift attention away from external thoughts and set an intention to stay present.

### 2. Maintaining Mindfulness During the Meeting

Mindfulness Strategies:

- Recognizing when the mind wanders or distractions occur.
- Gently refocusing on the present moment and ongoing discussion without self-criticism.

Practical Measures:

- Minimizing distractions, e.g., turning off phones or closing irrelevant tabs, especially in virtual settings.

### 3. Communication Dynamics

For Speakers:

- Ensuring each speaker has uninterrupted time to convey their thoughts fully.

For Listeners:

- Concentrating on understanding the speaker's message without immediately planning a response.
- Promoting deeper comprehension and engagement.

## Mindful Email Activity:

### 1. Introduction to Mindful Email Activity

Purpose: To enhance mindfulness and focus during routine tasks like checking emails.

Benefits: Improves email efficiency, overall focus, and concentration.

### 2. Preparation for Mindful Email Checking

Initial Pause: Before starting, take a moment to prepare your mind for a mindful approach.

Techniques for Centering:

- Engage in deep breathing.
- Calm your mind.
- Mentally set a goal to remain focused on the email task.

### 3. Executing Mindful Email Checking

Active Engagement:

- Check emails with full attention.
- Be aware of each action (clicking, reading, responding).

Mindfulness in Action:

- Recognize when attention drifts.
- Gently redirect focus back to emails without judgment.

### 4. Broader Implications of the Practice

Skill Enhancement: Improves listening and comprehension skills in other areas, such as conversations.

Long-term Benefits: Trains the mind to stay present and attentive, leading to better understanding and reduced distractions in various tasks.

## Scenario II

Another crucial component of mindful communication is non-judgment and active listening. Our diverse backgrounds, cultures, life experiences, and histories often shape our perceptions, leading to preconceived notions and biases. To illustrate this point, let's consider the following story:

*In a healthcare team meeting, Dr. Lee proposes a new approach to patient care. However, her colleagues, already having preconceived notions about her unconventional methods, start to tune out before she finishes. They quickly dismiss her ideas based on past experiences, rather than the current merits. The team leader, sensing the group's skepticism, shifts the discussion to a different topic.*

*Dr. Lee, feeling disregarded and marginalized, becomes reluctant to share future ideas. This reaction not only affects her morale but also deprives the team of potentially innovative patient care strategies that could benefit their practice.*

Consider these exercises to strengthen this component.

## Mindful Listening Exercise:

### 1. Introduction to the Exercise

Objective: To transform the habit of making quick judgments into a practice of exploration and understanding.

### 2. Identifying the Judgment Moment

Awareness: Recognize when you're making a snap judgment.

Examples: Thoughts like, "This person is always so negative," or "They probably don't know what they're talking about."

### 3. Pausing and Reflecting

Interrupting the Judgment: Take a moment to pause when a snap judgment arises.

Recognition: Understand that this is your perception, which may not align with reality.

### 4. Formulating a Curious Question

Transforming Judgment: Convert the judgment into a question aimed at understanding the situation or person.

Example: If thinking someone is negative, ask yourself, "What might be influencing their perspective?"

### 5. Utilizing the Question in Interactions

Application in Communication: Use this question in your next interaction with the person, either directly or as a guide for listening and responding.

Example: Saying something like, "I've noticed you seem concerned about this issue. Can you share more about your perspective?"

## Three Minute Pause:

### 1. Overview of the exercise

Purpose: To foster reflective thinking and reduce impulsive reactions in meetings.

Process: A three-minute reflection break following someone's speech or presentation.

### 2. Execution of the Pause

Activity: Participants take a moment to actively reflect on what was just said.

Goal: To separate personal judgments and assumptions from the facts presented by the speaker.

### 3. Reflective Process Steps

Identifying Judgments and Assumptions: Recognize preconceived notions or biases about the topic or speaker.

Focusing on the Facts: Concentrate on the actual content shared, distinct from emotional or subjective responses.

Mindful Awareness: Be aware of immediate reactions and question their basis—whether they are influenced by the current information or unrelated factors.

### 4. Benefits of the Exercise

Minimizing Impulsive Reactions: Encourages participants to pause and reflect before responding.

Reducing Bias: Helps in reducing responses influenced by personal biases or assumptions.



## Scenario III

Now let's explore the third pillar of mindful communication: Self-regulation and empathy. Before delving into detailed exercises, we'll first understand its significance through a story, highlighting how these skills impact team dynamics and relationships.

*In a small graphic design agency, the team receives critical feedback from a major client about their project. Leila, a lead designer, reacts defensively and hastily sends an email back, arguing against the client's suggestions and emphasizing the project's artistic integrity. Leila does this without discussing it with her team or manager.*

*This impulsive response, marked by a lack of self-regulation and empathy, damages the client relationship and creates internal team tension, as Leila's approach fails to consider the client's perspective or seek collaborative solutions with her team.*

Here are some exercises which can help you improve these skills:

## The 'Response Wait' Rule:

### 1. Introduction to the 'Response Wait' Rule

Purpose: To regulate emotional reactions to stressful emails or messages, enhancing communication.

### 2. Setting the Waiting Period

Rule: Agree to wait 30 minutes to an hour before responding to emotionally charged messages. (Adjust the waiting period based on specific circumstances or needs.)

### 3. Initial Response to Emotional Messages

Acknowledge Emotions: Recognize your initial emotional reaction upon receiving the message.

Taking a Break: Engage in activities like a short walk or deep breathing to create emotional distance.

### 4. Revisiting and Responding to the Message

Return When Calmer: Approach the message again once you are in a calmer state.

Re-evaluation: Re-read the message to understand the sender's perspective.

Composing a Response: Craft a response that is logical and professional. Ensure it's not dictated by initial emotions.

### 5. Collective Benefits in the Workplace

Cultural Impact: When adopted collectively, it fosters a more thoughtful and composed communication culture.

Professional Advantages: Promotes more constructive and effective interactions in a work environment.

## Three Minute Pause:

### 1. Introduction to the RAIN Technique

Purpose: Offers a structured method for managing challenging emotions and thoughts.

Origin: Developed by meditation teacher Michele McDonald.

### 2. Steps of the RAIN Technique

- Recognize: Notice and identify troubling thoughts, feelings, or sensations without judgment.
- Accept/Allow: Accept these experiences as they are, acknowledging that such feelings or thoughts are okay.
- Investigate: Gently explore the triggers of these emotions, observing reactions with kindness and curiosity.
- Non-Identification: Understand that these emotions and thoughts are not permanent and do not define you.

### 3. Benefits of Practicing RAIN

Outcome: Leads to improved self-regulation and mindfulness in daily life, helping in managing difficult emotions.

Interested in more self-regulation exercises?

**Watch my course “Managing Emotional Exhaustion” on Pluralsight!**

*Discover how to recognize, prevent, and deal with emotional exhaustion, helping you be more resilient and find a good work-life balance.*





# In Conclusion

Mindful communication is a vital skill in today's fast-paced workplace. It revolves around being present and focused, engaging in non-judgmental and active listening, and practicing self-regulation and empathy. These elements not only foster a more harmonious work environment but also lead to more effective and meaningful interactions. We've explored how various distractions, whether environmental, technological, or stemming from personal habits, can disturb this type of communication. Recognizing these barriers is the first step towards overcoming them.

By incorporating practical exercises for each of the three components, we can enhance our communication skills. These exercises are not just theoretical; they are tools that can be applied daily to improve our interactions with colleagues and clients alike.

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*Remember, the journey to mastering mindful communication is ongoing. It's about continuous learning and adapting. As we move forward, let's keep these key tips in mind: stay present, listen actively without judgment, regulate our responses, and empathize with others. This approach will not only benefit us professionally but also enrich our personal relationships and overall well-being.*





# Thank You For Your Attention

In our journey of mindful communication, let us embrace the art of presence, the grace of empathy, and the strength of clarity.



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