

Dealing With Disrespect

Handling your critics, no matter what they throw at you

Jono Bacon
1st Edition

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Many thanks to the following Open Source projects for providing the tools for me to create this book: Ubuntu, DocBook, GEdit, fop, Wordpress, MySQL, GIMP, and others.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to our boy, Jack, who always keeps life in perspective.

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1. Introduction

Most people are good people.

Grab a post-it note and write those words down and stick it on your wall. Doodle those words on your pencil case, make a wallpaper for your computer with them, or write them on a piece of paper and put it in your purse or wallet. Put them somewhere prominent that you will see every day, wherever you may be.

Good people do good things. They create things that make other people's lives better, whether that is a song, a video, a joke, a game, a job, a healthier lifestyle, a sense of safety, or any one of a thousand other things. Good people contribute something of value to our society, and it strengthens us as individuals as well as a community.

One of the most wonderful aspects of having so many good people, is that we have so many different contributions to our society. Some contributions look like Battlefield 4, some like Lady Gaga, some like Hello Kitty, some like Modern China Bistro. In a society with a rich patchwork of contributions it is human nature that we will all have different ideas of which of those contributions we consider to be valuable and which are not.

Within this society of things it is easy for us to forget that *good people* create those things.

This book is about helping us to focus on good people creating good things, to preserve that spirit of sharing, and to protect against those whose primary contribution is obstruction and disrespect.

Introducing Your Co-pilot

Before we get started I should probably introduce myself.

My name is Jono and I am an Englishman living in California in the USA. I moved here to live with my beautiful wife, Erica, and we have subsequently had a wonderful little boy called Jack.

Over the last fourteen years or so I have developed a passion for communities who get together, often using the Internet, to create interesting things.

I first got interested in communities in 1998 when I discovered an entirely free Operating System for computers called Linux. The basic notion of Linux is that people around the world, mostly of the nerdy persuasion, work together on the Internet to create a system that is shared by everyone.

As such, Bob in Indiana could contribute something to the system today that could ultimately be shared by everyone tomorrow. Likewise, I could contribute something tomorrow that everyone can benefit from the day after. Everyone is welcome to contribute if they have something of value to offer; the community is driven by individual contributions that combine to represent something much bigger than any individual could create alone.

Now this is not a book about technology so I won't bore you with the details of how this works; all you need to know is that people take time away from their families and friends to contribute their skills to make something that benefits the wider community.

When I first discovered this as a long-haired teenager in 1998, it absolutely captivated me. The notion of people who are merely connected by the Internet working together to create something that everyone can share and consume was mind-blowing to me. Without wishing to sound like an old fart, back in 1998 this was pretty much unheard of; all I heard back then, living in England, was the break-down of local communities and people not knowing their neighbors. Little did I expect that communities would be thriving online and creating interesting things together. Today this kind of sharing is far more commonplace.

Ever since that first introduction to the notion of communities, I have devoted the majority of my professional life to learning how to grow communities and help people to work together to create interesting things.

Professionally, I have gone on to become a community manager for one of the largest communities in the world, Ubuntu, which has hundreds of thousands of participants. I also provide consultancy services for many large organizations to help them grow internal and external communities. This has afforded me a fantastic opportunity not only to learn about growing communities but to also try different approaches and experiments in getting people excited about putting their brick in the wall.

Outside of work I have interests in music, podcasting, BBQ, and gaming, and with each of those interests I have created content and shared it with the wider community. This has ranged from releasing albums, to long-running podcasts, to building websites for tracking BBQ cooks, to broadcasting my gaming. With every one of these endeavors I have formed a community to be a part of growing, sharing, and enhancing the work that I started.

I have always believed that great communities are part of being human and the knowledge to grow them is something that should be shared freely so others can also create communities. To this end I wrote a book called *The Art of Community* which is available to buy or free to download from <http://www.artofcommunityonline.org>. I also organize community leadership events such as the annual *Community Leadership Summit* to continue to further the art and science of working together.

The summary of all this is that I am a community management nerd who loves playing heavy metal, smoking ribs, talking about interesting things on podcasts, and multi-player gaming. But what has this got to do with anything?

Venomous Words

You may have subtly noticed in the biography that I just bored you all with that I wrote a book on community management called *The Art of Community*. This begs the rather obvious question of why I have written this book, and why I need to write a book on this particular subject.

Well, let me tell you a little story to set the scene.

When I was starting out in community management I wrote a fairly innocuous blog post on my website at <http://www.jonobacon.org>. Not long after, I received an awfully mean-spirited and nasty comment: personal, full of vitriol, and entirely unnecessary.

As soon as I read it I became very self-reflective and worried that the statement may have represented the views of more than that one individual. In doing so, I entirely failed to balance the picture and consider the countless pleasant comments and wonderful email that I received. My mind zoned in on the negative.

In the midst of all of this, I logged on to discover a message from my friend Christian Schaller:

Hey Jono. I saw that comment on your blog, you must be delighted!

When I asked in what possible dimension that comment would make me happy, Christian responded with:

For someone to write that it means that they care what you think, so much so they felt the need to write it on your website. Congratulations!

In a strange and twisted way, Christian was right. When people care about something, it will often inspire them to take great lengths to protect it from something they disagree with.

Given that I have a fairly public facing position in the software world and work for a company that has made some controversial decisions from time to time, comments like that one on my blog were just the beginning.

In this role I am in a position of public representation for the company and the Ubuntu platform that the community and company builds. These controversial decisions were really pretty tame in the scheme of things; we were not devouring the planet of oil, we were not breaking the law, subjecting the elderly to freezing temperatures, or impoverishing the poor...we were merely making technical decisions that some people disagreed with.

From the outset most people threw the "whatever" gang sign (three fingers up ('W') and then slide them to the side ('E')) due to the fairly normal nature of software evolving, but to some of the vocal minority we were evil personified.

Some people in this vocal minority used about every possible combination of words to tell me to go screw myself, and for my employer to die in a fire. Some of these comments were so fueled with invective you would have imagined that we had sprinkled some razor-blades in their pet's cat food for comedic effect, as opposed to deciding to simply make a set of technical choices they disagreed with.

Consequently, over the years I have developed something of a thick skin. This was not by choice; I needed to develop a thick skin to survive my path in life. If I was a wallflower I would never have been able to succeed in my chosen career path...I would have left the path either due to rampant insecurity or resentment of our critics.

Instead, I made a fairly conscious choice to manage how I process and interpret feedback from others with one primary overriding goal:

Exercise modesty with the praise, be open to the feedback, and resilient to the haters.

This has turned into a lifelong ambition and pursuit, and while I am certainly not perfect in responding this way in all cases, I am satisfied enough with my progress to feel like these efforts have made a substantive difference, not just in my career, but in my life too.

While I am thankful for being able to make these changes, I am intimately aware that the ability to do so was largely a result of my circumstances and the benefit of being thrown into an active community that I bear a responsibility to. Unfortunately, most people don't have the luxury of such circumstances.

Hence the inspiration for this book.

This Book

Over the years I have had the privilege of meeting so many beautiful individuals; people with incredible talents, ideas, generosity, and creative ambitions for a better future.

Unfortunately, I have seen countless casualties of these good people who have shared great things online only to be subjected to mean-spirited comments from others. These are not meek people afraid to be challenged...but after a period of time of being repeatedly subjected to over-entitled, personalized, antagonistic comments they decide that it just isn't worth it and give up and do something else.

Every single time this *really* grinds my gears. For years I have been trying to figure out a way to improve the quality of our conduct, not just for my own communities, but as people in general, both on and offline.

Having explored this in great depth, and seeking the counsel of many others whose work I respect, the idealist in me has sadly come to the conclusion that there simply is no silver bullet to solve this problem. Fortunately, there are indeed *lots* of things that we can do to significantly move the needle in demanding fairer, more respectful discourse, irrespective of the opinions and ideas of those involved.

The solution needs to come in many parts, each focusing on different pieces of the problem. We need clearly defined policies, good leaders who set a positive example, open and welcoming communities, and other efforts to chisel out an expected standard of conduct that is both respectful and welcoming to those who also engage respectfully.

I mentally break these efforts into two fairly-broad areas.

1. Community leaders and managers can work together to build processes, systems, and standards that encourage responsible conduct.
2. We should equip everyone with the skills to interpret, process, act on, and in some cases cope with the feedback and input consumers of our work give us.

The former is where much of the focus exists in the community management world; setting firm guidelines around suitable conduct for those who participate in particular communities.

There are a few unfortunate limitations in this work though. Even if we put in place the very best of these processes, systems, and standards, some people will slip through the net and choose to ignore those guidelines and expectations and demonstrate anti-social behavior. In addition to this, such guidelines work well in crisply defined communities (e.g. such as Wikipedia), but for individual artists with a more general audience, it is difficult to define guidelines around how your audience should share their feedback about your work.

While many communities are fortunate enough to have leaders who can provide processes and standards of conduct, unfortunately, for the vast majority of people who are sharing their videos, songs, games, ideas, or otherwise, they don't have the support and guidance to manage how we interpret feedback and criticism.

What This Book Is

My goal with this book is to provide guidance for managing, processing, and coping with anti-social feedback from consumers of your contributions.

In sharing this guidance, I will be framing it within my goal of "exercise modesty with the praise, be open to the feedback, and resistant to the haters". I hope that becomes your goal too.

While the focus of being resistant to the haters is much of what we will cover here, exercising modesty with praise and being open to feedback is *critical*.

If we become resistant to *all* feedback we risk being deaf to fair and reasonable perspectives that challenge us and get us out of our comfort zones. Likewise, if we only read the praise and ignore all criticism, we risk becoming arrogant and self-righteous. No one likes those people...even those people.

As such, my goal here is to share some thoughts on being resilient to the haters, but to also help you to enjoy the praise when you see it, and to use the reasonable criticism as a vehicle for personal growth. I believe that this combination of attributes makes us better people.

What This Book Isn't

When I came up with the idea for this book, I knew it would be the hardest book I will ever write.

The complexity is not in what I want this book to be, but in clarifying what this book is *not intended to be*.

Suitably confused?

Let me explain.

History has taught me that the topic of conduct and how we interpret and manage it is thorny at best. Everyone has different ideas of what they consider to be appropriate conduct. What is acceptable to one person may be considered unacceptable to someone else.

In those situations *neither person* is wrong. Conduct and the way in which we interpret it is in the eye of the beholder.

I categorize all commentary from all people in three buckets:

1. *Agreeable* – comments that may be very positive or deeply critical, but are presented in a way that is polite, respectful, and constructive.
2. *Disagreeable* – comments that are rude and disrespectful, often resorting to name-calling, petty commentary, and unfounded accusations.
3. *Unacceptable* – comments that are abusive and/or threatening. These comments should typically involve stern moderation or in some cases, may require escalation to the authorities.

Everyone has different definitions of which comments fit into which categories, and this book is *not* here to present a single formula of doing this; only you be the judge of that. Instead I am providing a set of considerations and a code that you can use to help you make those decisions.

My goal here is also not to teach you how to put up a force-field to tolerate *unacceptable* content; if someone is being abusive, you should take the appropriate action to find a way to prevent the abuse.

Likewise, the content provided here cannot exist in a vacuum. Beautiful communities can only exist with a combination of practical guidelines and expectations of conduct, and what I am presenting here is just one tool in helping people to manage their interactions with each other.

How This Book Works

This book is supposed to be *simple*.

It is designed to be an easy to read, short, and to the point primer for how to read and interpret feedback and communications that relate to your areas of interest.

It is intended to be accessible and available to everyone. Whether you are creating music, sharing videos, creating video games, writing software, protesting the government, running a business, or anything else, the aim is that this book will be of some relevance to your work and interests.

Although the content here is primarily orientated around online communication, that is merely because it is a more common source of anti-social commentary. The guidance and ideas presented here are equally applicable in face-to-face scenarios.

My recommendation is that you read the book from start to finish. It shouldn't take too long, and the topics and ideas should be fairly straightforward to absorb. I then recommend you wait a few weeks, go about your life, and then read it again. This couple of weeks in-between will provide lots of examples and content that will help to illustrate the topics in the second reading.

Your Freedoms With This Book

As with my other book, *The Art of Community*, I believe that knowledge for how to create powerful communities is best shared freely with others. This is why this book, like *The Art of Community*, is available freely under a Creative Commons license.

More specifically, this book is licensed under a *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike* license.

This license allows you to freely download the book and share it with your friends. The license also allows you to freely copy content from the book and share it with others or in other (noncommercial) documents under the requirement that you credit the work to *Dealing With Disrespect by Jono Bacon*.

The license does not allow you to commercially redistribute the book. I know, I know, some of you Creative Commons purists won't like this...but I feel my primary ethical responsibility is to give the content away freely. If someone wants to make money from it, I want a piece of that pie for my family too; my son needs toys.

If you would like to commercially redistribute the book, please get in touch with me at jono@jonobacon.org.

Importantly, a core goal with *Dealing With Disrespect* is that it becomes a useful tool for those who are feeling down-trodden by anti-social commentary and feedback. My hope is that when you see someone feeling that way, you can share the book with them and it helps them put things in perspective.

Support The Book

Although the book is entirely free to download and share with others, you can also support the book by encouraging others to download it and share it too. The more people who read *Dealing With Disrespect* and find it useful, the better.

You can also throw a few extra toys in my son's bedroom by contributing a donation at <http://www.dealingwithdisrespect.com> if you find the book useful. Feel free to just donate whatever you can afford; whatever feels comfortable to you. Thanks!

Acknowledgements

Before we get going I just want to thank some folks for their continued support of my work, and more specifically, for helping this book to go from an idea to something you are reading right now.

Thanks to my wife, Erica, Andy Oram, Stuart Langridge, my parents, Elizabeth Krumbach Joseph, Mike Shinoda, Sam Hulick, Guy Martin, Neil Levine, and many others who I have undoubtedly missed off.

2. Diagnosing Discourse

Let's get started by delving into the nuts of bolts of how we communicate and which key ingredients are present in every communication.

The world is filled with different ways of communicating. Face to face discussion, sign-language, email, website comments, blog posts, video chats, phone calls, tweets, and more. We are not going to cover the details of how these different mediums of communication compare to each other...it doesn't matter.

What does matter is that each individual communication shared on one of these mediums has the same four key ingredients:

- Content The payload of a communication; the main point, message, or details that the communication is designed to deliver.
- Tone The choice of words, body language, or vocalization that is used to express that content.
- Sender The person who is at the other end of the line who is sending out the communication. This person has a wide range of attributes; age, ethnicity, gender, experience, social skills, and more.
- Context All communications happen within a wider context. Was it in a debate, in an argument, entirely out of the blue, was the sender just back from a trip and suffering from a short temper due to jet lag, or were you just back from a trip and suffering jet lag and said short temper?

Whenever we receive an individual nugget of communication from someone, be it a comment on a phone call, an email, an instant message, someone leaning over and speaking to you at your desk...we process the communication and interpret each of these four different ingredients with differing levels of priority.

It is this cocktail of ingredients that helps us interpret the communication and file it into one of our three buckets; *agreeable*, *disagreeable*, or *unacceptable*.

Some Examples

Now as I said earlier, it is up to you to make your own determination of which buckets the communications you receive go in; there is no formula or algorithm that universally applies to all communications for everyone.

To get us started though, let's run through a few examples of how I would interpret different communications and how these different attributes apply.

To provide some context for these examples, let's imagine that I am a musician who has just released a new album called *Let's Ride* online and I have received some feedback from different people.

Agreeable

Let's start with a close friend who is an avid music fan who posts this entirely out of nowhere:

"I think you made a real mistake with *Let's Ride*. I don't think it reflects well on you".

In terms of the content, this communication is pretty limited; it simply demonstrates disapproval. Importantly, the tone is respectful. Criticism doesn't equate to disrespect and very poignant critical feedback can be expressed respectfully; here it is non-abusive although the content is rather generic. Given the fact that the sender is a close friend and they have experience with music and the context was passive and not in a conflict scenario, I would evaluate this feedback more seriously than most and follow up with the friend to find out more details about what specifically they think doesn't reflect well on me. Let's file this in *acceptable*.

Let's now imagine that in the same context the same comment was made by a random stranger who is seemingly outside of my target audience for the music (such as a random person on Twitter):

"I think you made a real mistake with *Let's Ride*. I don't think it reflects well on you".

Given that the content is quite generic and lacks detail but the tone is respectful, I would also ask for more details about what the issue is. Sure, the sender is unknown and might not know my style, but they may have some valuable feedback that is worth drilling into; sometimes the most remarkable life lessons can come from complete strangers. Importantly, the tone is respectful and non-abusive so it is worth following up. Let's file this in *acceptable* too.

Disagreeable

Let's now assume that another random person I don't know personally who is outside of my target audience sends this, entirely out of nowhere:

"*Let's Ride* is an utter piece of shit. You need to pack up your guitar and go flip burgers!"

The content of this communication clearly demonstrates lack of approval, but is still very unspecific about what they dislike about my record. The tone is quite rude and disrespectful, and the context appears to be passive (not the result of an argument, for example). Given the tone and the fact I don't know the person and they are outside of my target audience, I would ignore this. It is trolling...don't engage, just ignore and enjoy your life. Let's file this in *disagreeable*; it is quite rude and disparaging, but it is not abusive or threatening.

Now, what if someone I know and respect said the same thing? In those cases it is easy to dwell on that person hating your work, particularly if they inspire you, and it is also easy to be defensive and tell them where they can shove their feedback (spoiler alert: the sun doesn't shine there).

The trick here is to determine the attributes of the *sender* and the *context*.

As an example, let's assume I work for a large insurance company and the sender is an executive who has a reputation for being brash with people. In this case I would chalk the tone down to his approach to communicating and likely that few people challenge him on it. Now, I am not suggesting that way of communicating is OK and tolerable (that's life, some people are like that), but it probably means the tone was not as personally targeted to me as I may have originally thought.

Let's now assume the person is another musician I respect but who has just got home from touring. They are probably tired and have the post-tour blues (common with musicians) which might explain them being so brash too.

In both of these scenarios I would file the communication in *disagreeable*. Their tone is awful, but the *context* likely explains why. In these cases due to the nature of the sender being someone of importance to me, I would also follow

up with them in a polite and respectful fashion and ask them for more specific feedback about why they didn't enjoy the album.

Sam Hulick is a BAFTA nominated and NBC News award winning composer for film, television and interactive media, best known for creating the signature music for the Mass Effect and Baldur's Gate video games.

As an artist contracted to produce music for game studios, receiving feedback is key part of his job. He shared with me how valuable client feedback is to him:

The most important feedback I ever get is from my clients. In that context, it's really important to not ever take any criticism personally. I once got feedback on a piece of music that was something along the lines of "this sounds like Looney Tunes." Though it might be easy to take offense to that, you can't. It's strictly business, and the client is trying to convey, as best they can, how a piece of music sounds to them and point out its negative qualities so that you can focus on making corrections. Client feedback is a great way to encourage an artist to push outside their safety zone and expand their horizons.

Sam's approach to feedback and criticism does not just apply to clients. He sees art and how we consume it as a very personal thing and as such, our feedback and criticism is very personal too:

I can't really fault anyone for not liking my work! Art is highly subjective. It's all in how you decide to interpret criticism. A well-worded few sentences can often be taken at face value and can sometimes be helpful. A simple "this sucks," however, can either be interpreted as "I'm not into this kind of music" or "I'm just here to pick on people and I have no constructive opinion."

As you can see, handling feedback and criticism is fundamentally about keeping a sense of *perspective*; a common theme we will explore throughout the book.

Understanding Regularity

Another consideration when assessing communications is the role of regularity. As an example, imagine someone who I don't know very well personally, constantly posts criticism on my website. Imagine this person posted:

"Let's Ride is another example of the poor quality work that you put out time after time".

A lot of people who get continual streams of criticism often react defensively and in some cases negatively. This is most typically because the *sender* is not someone they particularly respect and the *context* seems almost targeted, like someone is deliberately pushing your buttons.

Speaking personally, I try not to let this bother me if the *tone* is polite and respectful, and particularly if there is good *content*. In many cases we can use these cases as an opportunity for personal growth.

As one such example, there is a guy who I know who we shall call Buck to protect the innocent. ;-)

Buck would regularly post comments on my blog with criticism of my employer, the work we were doing, why we made particular decisions and more.

Buck had a very definitive set of viewpoints and the two of us simply saw things differently. Where I saw the company challenging the norm and innovating to build growth and focus in places we never had an opportunity to influence, Buck saw us compromising the very fabric of the community we had worked so hard to nurture to achieve these goals.

Buck's regularity and commitment to responding was admirable. Every post I made, whether on my blog, on various websites, articles and elsewhere, Buck was there with long and detailed comments criticizing our work and asking pointed questions. I would post something and often within an hour the expected Buck response was there, as expected.

This regularity was so consistent that he started developing something of a reputation and some felt he was a troll.

I tried to resist looking down on him for one key reason: almost every one of his communications was polite and respectful. They were deeply pointed and sharply critical, but he always exercised respect and dignity for both sides of the discussion.

Breaking things down, I respected him as a *sender* – he knew his stuff. I didn't agree with it, and I thought he was more paranoid than he needed to be, but his viewpoints were not without merit. His tone was always respectful, and I later discovered that the reason he wrote such long and detailed posts was that he was often stationed in remote locations by his company and had plenty of time on his hands...hence the luxury of providing his thoughts in such exhaustive detail.

After about two years of this he was in my local area and we met up for coffee. I was curious to see what he was like and he turned out to be a genuinely awesome guy. He was fun, full of energy, and different to what I expected. While his regularity of criticism could have acted as an irritant, managing the situation ultimately resulted in him becoming a friend.

Unacceptable

Let's now look at a more disappointing example. Imagine a random person on a website said this:

"Your work is a piece of shit, you fucking [insert racist term here]. If you don't stop producing this garbage I am going to come round to your house and cut you".

In this example the *tone* of the communication vastly overshadows the *sender* and *content* of the message. It doesn't matter who communicates something like this; it is entirely unacceptable.

The *context* is an important consideration though: communications like this often point to personality disorders or anger management issues. I would naturally put this in the *unacceptable* category but if I felt I could help, I might get in touch with the poster and express a concern over the tone and ask them if they are doing OK. In many cases this kind of conduct is a cry for help. If they continued to threaten though, I would consider more formalized action; we all have to draw the line somewhere.

In Conclusion

What I hope these examples all illustrate is that you really do need to take into consideration all four ingredients (*sender, content, tone, context*) when evaluating each communication you receive. If we ignore some of these ingredients, we don't effectively apply objectivity to the communication, and this will bite us on the behind later.

More specifically, there are a lot of people in the world who are bombastic when reacting to *tone*. We all know people like this; they see something they consider to be rude or personally jarring and this is their justification to light the firework that results in a massive argument.

To be frank, this is the *easy way out*.

It is easy to only consider the tone and to ignore the other ingredients in the communication. This is the reason why some teenagers often react this way; their brains have not yet been equipped with the experience that helps them to understand how to interpret communications with all four ingredients. Don't take the easy way out. It will make you look like a teenager and this means you are going to have to get a lame haircut and start listening to navel-gazing music.

If you have traditionally only evaluated some of the four ingredients and not all of them, don't worry. It will take some time and practice to get into the habit of assessing them all. You will get there, I assure you, but you will need to mentally exercise yourself to assess all four ingredients, particularly in the most challenging of situations such as conflict scenarios, under pressure, or when you are tired.

Moving Forward

Before we move on to explore methods of handling *disagreeable* and *unacceptable* categories of communication, I want to explore the many different factors that can influence our communication content and style and how these factors can often fuel anti-social behavior. The next few chapters will delve into this.

Note

It may be tempting to skip over these next few chapters, but I strongly encourage that you resist that urge. For us to refine how we manage communications it is essential that we know some of the mechanics of what makes us human and how these ingredients can influence our behavior. These chapters will provide this important background context for the wider book.

3. Human Ingredients

People are fragile creatures. We surround ourselves with big buildings, cars, computers, and other modern conveniences. We have medicine and hospitals. Our lives are interspersed with problems and often very reachable solutions, and it can be easy to think there is a button we can press to solve virtually any problem for us.

At our core though we are naked people under all of this. We are big bags of blood, bones, and emotions with our own set of ingredients that describe who we are, and a set of feelings that shape our world-view based on those ingredients.

Each of these different ingredients play important roles in how we communicate and how these aspects of our lives affect our passion, decision-making, and future prospects.

Let's take a look...

Age

Time is a key part of our lives. Our calendars, meetings, events, birthdays and other things are the marionettes that time keeps busy. As such, the aggregate of time, our age, plays a key role in how we communicate.

Age is often used as an interesting label of both the *perception* and the *reality* of experience. As an example, we would all agree that a 9 year-old is likely to have a lot less life experience than a 45 year old. Likewise, we may consider a 30 year-old to be at the cutting edge of technology but consider an 80 year-old to be over the hill.

These considerations often apply to our perception of the *sender* when assessing a communication as well as how much actual experience they demonstrate within their communications.

Let's look at *perception* first.

As an example, imagine you are a 45 year-old who gets a very frustrated message from a 15 year-old lecturing you on a recent decision you made. It could be tempting to reject their feedback with "what do they know, they are a kid!". Likewise, if you are a 15 year-old teenager figuring out the world one day at a time, getting told you don't know what you are talking about because you are a kid is quite possibly the most annoying thing ever. As such the mere acknowledgement of age can generate tension.

We should be careful here; there are many smart and knowledgeable kids and many stupid and ignorant adults, so try not to discriminate on age.

In terms of *reality* though, there is indeed quite often a noticeable gap of experience between two quite different ages. As I mentioned earlier, it is easy to assume a 9 year old is less experienced in a particular profession or skill than a 45 year old, but is there as much of a difference between a 25 year old and a 45 year old? Well, the lines get blurred more easily. The 25 year old could match on skills and knowledge but will likely lack life experience.

This is an important distinction. As an example, you could be the best musician in the world who can play every scale and song perfectly, but if you have never played in an active gigging band, you lack the practical experience of being a musician in a touring capacity. This is the difference between skills and experience, and in many cases younger people lack the experience and don't understand how much value that experience can bring to our perception.

This is not surprising. It is difficult to understand the value of life experience until you actually...y'know...experience it. This is similar to how a lot of people say "you think you know what being a parent is going to be like, but you really only get it when you actually have kids". As one such parent I can emphatically tell you this is true, despite how annoying it was to hear before we had Jack.

Age often relates to anti-social behavior because in some cases there will be people who have the skills but both lack the life experience and fail to understand the value of it. In these cases the individual often feels the possession of the skills is enough but they don't benefit from the world-view that this experience provides. Thus, conflict can brew.

As such, always strive to take age into account when judging the sender in a communication. Don't use age as a means to unfairly assume other attributes (e.g. maturity/knowledge), but bear in mind that it may affect the assumptions and experience of the *sender* and as such their assumptions may be off-base as they are only seeing part of the picture. I try to use these cases as an opportunity to mentor as opposed to lecture those who lack the experience; this will grow a positive relationship as opposed to fuel a negative one.

Gender

Gender is another attribute that plays an important role in our communications, and typically in two areas: how the gender of another person influences our perception of them and how our own gender influences our own actions.

In terms of the former, good people understand that gender should not play a discriminatory role, but unfortunately sexism is still an issue we battle with today. Sadly, women typically see the brunt of this with sexism demonstrated typically either very directly with blatantly misogynistic comments ("hey!!! show me your rack!") or in a more subtle manner ("given that you are working within a man's industry, I wouldn't expect you to understand"). Either way, gender is acting as an unfair differentiating factor.

Rather unsurprisingly, sexism can be a trigger of anti-social and combative commentary, but it often isn't as clear-cut as you'd imagine.

Sure, in some cases someone is obviously being an idiot and delivering an unacceptable misogynistic comment, but there are also cases where conflict brews unintentionally.

First, not everyone has the same definition of what "sexist" looks like. As an example, some may feel that referring to a woman as a "chick" might be degrading and sexist, but to others it isn't. Some will draw their line somewhere in the middle of these two points.

Second, cultural experiences and age relate to gender too. It is not uncommon that members of an older generation end up being unintentionally sexist because they come from an era in which men and women played quite different social roles. Likewise, comments from people who were raised in a culture where women are treated as second-class citizens may also inadvertently appear sexist, despite their best intentions due to their cultural upbringing. Of course, I am not condoning this behavior, merely highlighting that the *sender* of the message may not realize they are being offensive. In these cases some constructive feedback to highlight the problem and recommending a more appropriate way of communicating can help to improve things.

In other words, judge the content of the person's character and their intentions in addition to their choice of words. In some situations an uncomfortable mix of age, culture, and sub-par articulation skills can make someone sound like much more of a sexist monster than they really are.

The other aspect where gender can play a role is in how our gender affects our own actions and goals.

Subconsciously, all of the human ingredients I am covering in this chapter affect how we view the world and our confidence in achieving our goals. Some people feel a lower level of confidence due to their gender.

An example of this are women who are trying to be successful in industries that are traditionally male dominated. No one comes out and ever tells you directly about these kinds of insecurities, so be mindful that the person on the other end of the communication may be experiencing this. This can affect both men and women.

It is important to always remember that unless you have directly experienced discrimination, it is difficult to really imagine what it *feels* like. As an example, as a man I would never wish to claim I understand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of misogyny; my assumption does not necessarily map to reality.

When assessing communications, consider these aspects carefully. Always treat people with equality and dignity, and bear in mind how gender may affect the sender's assumptions and expectations, and also how it can affect you as well.

Cultural Influences

Culture is the completed jigsaw puzzle constructed from your upbringing, home life, where you have lived, your exposure to different ideas, how much you have traveled and met people from other cultures, etc. All of these pieces affect how we see the world and how we communicate within it.

As one such example, I was born in England in North Yorkshire (in the north of the country). I was raised in a largely rural setting before moving to the south of England to a large village. I then moved to a city to go to University before moving to California to live in an entirely different country and culture. Throughout the latter part of this history I have also traveled to over 25 countries as part of my work.

All of these experiences have shaped me as a person. My early life experiences have provided me with a sense of empathy for different people and perspectives. My experiences of moving when I was young and getting over the unsettling transition has given me the confidence to set goals and accomplish them. My travel has helped me to understand different cultures and ideas. Throughout my life my parents have always instilled the value of '*the world is your oyster*' which has helped me become an optimist with a positive sense of opportunity.

Likewise, some aspects of my experience have had less rosy implications. I used to be rather jealous when I was younger, which I suspect was due to not dating much as a kid due to a long term relationship, and thus being inexperienced. I also used to be a little unforgiving if I felt people were lazy, which I think is part of my presumed Northern heritage and culture of "just get on with it".

Starting my career in the public eye as a journalist and building a fairly public website also generated a bit too much ego in me than I would have liked. Thankfully my best friend, Stuart, helped me shake that demon (this is one of the reasons I write a lot about the risks of ego in my brilliant, fantastic, awesome, godly books. Oops.)

Each of these negative life experiences have affected my communications over the years, thankfully less and less as I have got older. Always be mindful that everyone you communicate with has their own insecurities and rough edges that have shaped them as people and they may well be in a period of transition.

It can be tempting to write anti-social behavior off as "that person is being a dick", but remember, this is the *easy way out*. In many cases those people are a product of their environment, and it can be beneficial to reach out to them to help them over those bumps in the road. More often than not they know the problems exist, but are too embarrassed to ask for help.

As such, always consider these cultural elements when assessing communications and in particular, the *sender*. Cultural experiences and a person's background can heavily ingrain certain assumptions or approaches in a person, so being able to see these and take them into account is important. Sometimes it might not be logic speaking, it may be ten years of sub-optimal upbringing or ingrained insecurities speaking. Being aware of these elements can help to keep your frustration at bay and keep things in perspective.

Social Skills

I have spent a significant chunk of my life working within a fairly technical community. This community spans hundreds of thousands of people across many different companies, projects, ideas, and goals. The vast majority of the discussion here takes place online on email discussion lists, chat channels, social media networks, and websites.

At times the conduct in this community is heated at best and bloody horrible at worst. I have seen both the very best and very worst in people and when the latter end of the scale rears its ugly head, it is often rather deplorable, particularly given that all the anger is usually focused on...software choices.

Now, get ready to have your mind blown. Strap yourself in for a rocking spoiler alert...

...quite a few people who use the Internet don't have particularly good social skills.

I know...pretty ground shaking, eh?

In many conflict scenarios people presume that the person on the other side of the connection is knowingly and deliberately being difficult and causing problems. In many cases that person is simply not equipped with the social sophistication to handle that discussion, feedback, and context better.

It reminds me of a guy who joined a community some years back. He was excited and motivated to participate but at every step of the way he caused problems.

It was a vicious cycle. He would release something or make a blog post and when people left even the most minor of critical comments, he would explode at them. He would often join a perfectly civil debate and then ultimately get frustrated and tell people to go screw themselves. He was and continues to be tremendously talented and a wonderful contributor, but was not equipped with the social skills to handle multiple perspectives in an online environment. Interestingly, face to face the same issues didn't happen.

I reached out to him one time to express my concerns about his conduct and to offer a helping hand. I asked him about his life experiences and it became evident that he was a bit of a social outcast at school, rarely spent time with friends out of school, and he spent the majority of his life online. In other words: his entire world was the Internet. He could turn it on and off when he chose to and did not consider himself to be accountable to his actions as invariably he saw other people as merely words on a screen as opposed to real people with thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

After learning about his history I became more sympathetic to why he behaved in the way he did. He simply didn't have the social capabilities to guide him in many social situations.

Always remember that a lot of people have this issue, and again, age, culture, and other attributes often combine to influence their communication style and tone. Bear in mind that the angry person who is communicating with you may just not know how to talk to people. Also consider that *you* may not have the best social skills either, and knowing this can be a fantastic first step towards improving them.

Experience

An important aspect of life that can influence a person's *content* and *tone* in a communication as well as your interpretation of them as the *sender*, is *experience*.

Experience is another one of those big, general, and at times confusing words. I define experience as the *collection of life experiences that shape your decisions and your future*.

Of course, that definition can encompass a wide variety of things, but I break experience down into three primary areas.

Firstly, we have *domain* experience. This is experience of a particular profession, industry, or otherwise. It is important to note that domain experience is not just having the skills but also the day to day practical experience of applying those skills. An example of this could be domain experience of working as a games designer (having the skills to design a

game but also working day to day in the games industry and collaborating with other people on a game). As we discussed earlier, having just the skills without the practical experience really only gives you part of the picture.

Secondly, there is *social* experience. This is life experience of working with others. This covers the experience of working with different types of people, reading social cues, understanding how people communicate in different situations, and being cognizant of your own personality traits.

Finally, we have *practical* experience. This is experience of *getting things done*. This includes how to work on projects, define deadlines, set work items, keep projects on track, manage expectations and more. This is often combined with *domain* and *social* experience in terms of getting things done within a particular industry, profession, or company.

Everyone who you communicate with will have different levels of experience in these three areas. What can often happen is that a communication that makes perfect sense to someone with more experience may not jive with someone with less experience.

As an example, I work in the software industry. While I am no yoda when it comes to software, I have been in the industry for a while and my experience has been formed from delivering software and services with a wide range of needs from the CEO down to the people using the software. Am I an expert? I doubt it. Have I been in the lions den of delivering software? Yes.

Over the years I have seen a consistent pattern in the criticism of certain decisions often coming from people who have never walked in the same shoes as the people making those decisions.

As an example, I know one guy who is tremendously passionate about one of these software systems who is often very, very critical (and often quite rude) but doesn't have either the domain or practical experience to understand the context of the decision. In other words, his lack of practical experience in the industry has given him unrealistic expectations based upon guesstimates. It isn't his fault though, without having that experience how is he supposed to see the context?

This is a key benefit of experience – those without experience often judge a situation based on the outer edges that are exposed. Experience teaches us to look in-between those outer edges and see what is inside.

As an example, someone new to playing the guitar knows that the goal is to play the right notes at the right time. Someone who has been playing for years knows that the skill is not in the notes you play, but the ones you don't, and the trick is delivering the notes with emotion as part of an overall performance. Experience can only teach us these things as we explore our craft, work with different people, and share and absorb new ideas.

Another key element of experience and one that particularly relates to communication is that those with experience learn how to pick their battles.

When you are younger and more inexperienced, pretty much *everything* is a battle. This is why teenagers have a reputation for being argumentative. Many teenagers have not yet developed the experience to pick their battles to achieve what they really want and to also quit while they are ahead.

This aspect of experience is visible in droves on the Internet. We often see people bickering left, right, and center about minor details. Those with experience usually think "this just isn't worth it" much earlier in the debate than those without experience.

As such, be sure to consider the experience of a person, particularly when assessing the *sender* in a communication.

Judge this wisely though. There is no direct relationship between experience and status. There are many awful CEOs out there, and many amazing people on the bottom rung of life's ladder. Experience is judged by accomplishments and results, not what car they drive or what clothes they wear.

Note

Some of you may be wondering how you share experience and life lessons learned with those who feel more experienced than they really are. It can indeed be challenging to do this, but I recommend you engage with

the person in a non-confrontational way and offer your feedback as a means of augmenting their experience, not telling them that they are wrong.

This approach puts you in the position of a mentor that not only helps that person learn and grow, but also builds trust.

Psychological Factors

As I mentioned earlier, human beings are a lot more fragile than we might like to admit. At the core of this fragility are our minds. Buried inside our brains are all manner of different factors that can influence not only how we communicate, but also how we solve problems, pursue our goals, and more.

Now, before I get started, I want to make one thing very, very clear: I am not a doctor, psychologist, therapist or any other kind of medical professional. I am a community manager and author, so treat my words here as one guy's experience and considerations and not medical recommendations or guidance. If you or someone you know is suffering from one or more of the issues here, I recommend they see a medical professional if you or they see fit to.

OK, with that out of the way, let's take a look at some of these psychological factors.

Stress

At some point, every one of us deals with stress.

Stress is a feeling of tension and pressure that can be felt from a variety of different symptoms. This can include anxiety, eating issues, sleep problems, exhaustion, nervousness, sexual dysfunction, and more.

In small doses stress can be good for us. It can get us out of our comfort zones and get us to achieve more, but the key point here is "small doses". Longer term or more drastic cases of stress are really not healthy at all.

The causes of stress can be numerous. In the academic world stress is often judged on the *Social Readjustment Rating Scale* (SRRS) which maps a score to common causes. This can range from minor violations of the law that come in at 10 points, to pregnancy at 40 points, right up to death of a spouse at 100 points. There are 43 different ratings on the scale, and when you add up the score it provides a good indication of stress. A total score over 300 means a high risk of illness and a score closer to 150 means a slight risk of illness.

The key point here is that different things stress us out in different ways and they combine together to have an overall impact on our physical and mental health.

The consequences of stress vary from person to person. Some people can privately suffer and never take their stress out on others, but those people are rare. Most people share their stress with others in three primary ways: irritability, nervousness, and insecurity.

These issues often start with irritability. Someone may be impatient, angry, or passive aggressive. Invariably they are aware of their irritability and this often results in a sense of nervousness about how other people perceive their actions (the stress is often generated by career, financial, or family worries). This then often results in insecurity, which in turn fuels further irritability as well as defensiveness.

As such, always bear in mind that the person who is communicating with you may be having a really stressful time and they may not feel comfortable sharing with you (or even know themselves) what those causes of their stress are, particularly if they don't know you on a personal level. They may be good people with good intentions, but even good people have crappy days filled with stress.

Unfortunately there is another form of stress that can have more dire consequences if not dealt with: *burnout*.

Burnout

Burnout is a problem that affects all walks of life, interests, and professions, and it can be devilishly difficult to spot in people, particularly those you don't know very well.

Burnout is the series of often subtle changes in personality, perspective, values, and behavior that can generate untold amounts of stress and both mental and physical discomfort. As these changes progress they can be so subtle that they can be difficult to identify. Unfortunately, burnout is often misdiagnosed as irrationality, short temperament, unusual behavior or lack of tolerance, and is often a source of anti-social communication.

Fortunately, there is a scale developed by two psychologists, *Herbert Freudenberger* and *Gail North*, that identifies 12 stages of progressively worsening burnout, and the common symptoms. This is known as the *The Burnout Cycle*.

These steps don't necessarily happen in a sequential order (it can vary from person to person), and some sufferers will skip some of the steps whereas some will dwell longer on them, but these steps offer a list of warning signs for potential burnout victims.

I wrote about the The Burnout Scale in my other book, *The Art of Community*, and I have presented it at a number of conferences. It has blown me away how much it resonates with people in terms of their own psychology and that of their friends and colleagues.

I am going to run through these stages one by one; they can be a useful set of indicators for spotting burnout in yourself as well as others. Some of those anti-social communications may well be the burnout speaking and in those cases it is better to be a friend than a foe.

Stage 1. A compulsion to prove oneself

Burnout typically begins with a tendency to want to prove oneself. This often stems from a feeling of insecurity that your work is not being respected or valued. When this happens, the burnout sufferer often tries to compensate by trying to prove him or herself.

Stage 2. Working harder

Working long hours is a common sign of the first stages of burnout. With an existing feeling that you need to prove yourself to others, a natural conclusion is that you work harder and provide more and more visible examples of your success to others. In these cases it is not uncommon to stay late at work, progressively working later and later. You often find yourself awake late at night, possibly working until two or three o'clock in the morning under the belief that more hours invested will make you feel better and prove your value.

Stage 3. Neglecting your needs

At this stage, simple pleasures such as sleeping, eating, socializing with friends and watching *Seinfeld* are seen as just that: pleasures, and as such a distraction from work. Your desire to prove yourself is strong and your top priority is to find ways of working more and more. You find it easier and easier to say no to people who want to spend time with you, and you find it easier to find reasons to work.

Late nights and early mornings are common and the lack of sleep results in an increased caffeine intake, tiredness, and irritability during the day. It is also likely that you are eating junk food as it is quick and convenient and your tiredness makes cooking seem like more of a chore than it is.

Stage 4. Displacement of conflicts

Some friends and family are likely noticing that something is up with you and may have even asked what is wrong. In this earlier stage of the burnout cycle you are firmly of the belief that nothing is wrong and that friends and family are just being overly analytical. You shrug it off and suggest that you just have a lot on your plate.

Stage 5. Revision of values

The obsession with work means that traditional values such as friends or hobbies are pushed aside. Here your only evaluation of success is being good at what you do. This is a dangerous part of the cycle, as you are actively starting to distance yourself from your friends. You do not see social interactions and time with your family as things to be proud of and rewarding parts of your life, but instead as continued distractions that get in the way of the work you need to do.

You find yourself making excuses to work more often. Evenings and weekends are taken up with work and your friends stop asking you to spend time with them because you are always saying no.

Stage 6. Denial of emerging problems

We can now see cynicism, intolerance, and aggression often raising their ugly heads. Colleagues are dismissed as idiots; your increasing problems are blamed on lack of time, incompetent coworkers, and unfair workloads. You are tired from the lack of sleep, you are probably pretty unhealthy from all the pizza and caffeine, and the pressure to prove yourself is causing you to feel sorry for yourself and that other people don't understand the pressure and stress you are under.

You are increasingly lashing out and snapping at people, and find yourself causing arguments but struggle to apologize. Life is feeling rather stressed at stage six.

Stage 7. Withdrawal

You reduce your social interaction and contacts to a minimum and dial your work up to 11. You are at a point where relief from the stress is becoming more and more important.

You may start to relieve the stress by boozing more often during the week or possibly even resorting to drugs. Whatever your choice of substance, you appear to be indulging in it a little more than usual, and dangerously so.

Stage 8. Obvious behavioral changes

Your strange and erratic behavior is obvious to your friends, family, and colleagues. You are not yourself, and your nearest and dearest can see it a mile away.

You are even more physically exhausted and you are likely to be experiencing some health problems such as headaches, skin problems and low energy.

Your personal relationships are under a lot of pressure and you start to feel increasingly depressed, particularly when you are alone at night.

Stage 9. Depersonalization

At this point you feel like you offer no value to the world and lack confidence in what you could once do.

Your life feels like one long series of mechanical and emotionless functions. The previous desire to demonstrate your worth is decreasing; you just feel like you are going from one step to another.

Stage 10. Inner emptiness

You feel an emphasized sense of emptiness. You resort more to booze or drugs or possibly find relief in overeating, strange and exaggerated sexual behavior, or other unusual and destructive activities. You feel more and more depressed.

Stage 11. Serious depression

You feel hopeless, lost, and exhausted, and see little cause for optimism for the future.

Stage 12. Burnout syndrome

At this, the most serious level, you feel suicidal and desperate for a way out. You are on the verge of mental and physical collapse and need medical attention.

Coping With Stress and Burnout

After reading through all of this talk about stress and burnout, life can seem a little bleak. Fortunately, stress and burnout can be resolved. Remember, we are all susceptible to these issues, so we need to know how to help ourselves deal with it as well as how to help others.

Unfortunately, there is no single recipe or secret formula for managing this. The best solution is to subscribe to one simple philosophy that has helped people deal with stressful times with a great degree of success:

I got your back.

Although it may seem outrageously simple, the easiest and most applicable method is to first develop a nose for the symptoms of stress and burnout and to then extend a personal hand of friendship to the sufferer. Having that sense of companionship through a tough time can really help with burnout.

To detect the symptoms you should first read, reread, and then read again the 12 stages in The Burnout Cycle. This provides a core set of knowledge for understanding the nature and causes of burnout. You should then keep a general eye out for these symptoms in others.

Specifically look for and be conscious of changes in behavior. If someone just "doesn't seem herself," she may be getting bitten by burnout. It is these changes in behavior that are the typical transition points between the different stages of The burnout cycle.

If you suspect that someone is getting burned out, just strike up a personal conversation and be entirely frank. Tell her that you noticed she has been a little different recently and that you are concerned. Ask her if she is OK, and ask if there is anything you can help with. In many cases the person will tell you what is on their mind, what is stressing them out, and any problems they are experiencing.

With overwork as a common cause of burnout, you should also ask how she is coping with her workload and if there is anything you can do to ease it. This offer of help in itself can be a stress reliever—it is a validation that someone is there to help her get through her TODO list.

In terms of taking care of yourself, one of the most effective methods of shackling up burnout is to get away from things and unwind. It is amazing how a small vacation can help someone decompress.

This happened to me when I felt I was burning out. I felt like I wasn't myself and could feel how stressed and anxious I was. To deal with this, I went to Ireland for a long weekend to visit a friend. It is incredible how those few days with a friendly face, getting out in the countryside, and getting away from a computer helped.

If you suspect you or someone else is burning out, tell them to do the same and get away for a few days. They will almost certainly claim they can't or don't need to, but stand firm: it is for their own good, and they will thank you for it.

Personality/Social Problems

Now, there are of course a slew of other potential psychological factors that we could best describe as either personality problems or medical disorders.

This could include issues such as depression, narcissistic personality disorder, attention deficit disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, or something else.

I am not going to get into the details, symptoms, and causes of these areas for two reasons. Firstly, I have a cursory knowledge of them compared to a professional, and secondly, as a result I would not want to steer you in the wrong direction.

There is one important takeaway though, as with the previous factors we have discussed – the person at the other side of the communication may well be suffering from one or more of these issues. As such, when you see a *disagreeable* or *unacceptable* comment from someone, there may be a much bigger story going on behind the scenes than you may realize.

Needs

Before we wrap up this chapter, I want to highlight a few other key elements that can affect someone's style and approach to communication. These aspects don't map to human ingredients; it relates to the underlying *needs* of a person.

Everyone has needs that span beyond the core things we need to survive such as food, water, and shelter. We also have needs in terms of human interaction. We all need a sense of validation and value, we need to feel we have information about the things we care about, and we need to feel we can access the people who create and influence things we care about.

Let's explore these needs next.

Validation

Everyone needs to feel validation. That is, everyone needs to feel they are making forward progress, to feel like they are on the right track, and to be reassured they are doing good things.

I don't care if you are a rock star, a CEO, a wrestler, a writer or anyone else, you need to feel that your contributions to the world resonate and make a difference in the areas you care about. Everyone needs this to different degrees and at different times in their lives.

In many cases good parents, managers, and friends provide the validation we need, but some people lack these reassurances and don't feel comfortable asking for them.

A lot of online conflict and criticism is often born out of people wrestling to feel a sense of validation. This often closely intersects with ego; they desperately need validation and thus try to get it by using sensationalism and self-promotion. These folks often seek to achieve this by communicating in a fairly anti-social and overtly aggressive manner to affirm authority to feel a sense of influence.

This reminds me of an individual I know who has worked tirelessly to grow his Twitter follower-count, and whose content always smacks of self-promotion and puff pieces about his so-called accomplishments. In reality he has contributed little other than self-aggrandizing efforts to continue to grow his tiny empire of one.

Over the years he has caused a huge amount of drama and controversy by writing sensationalist pieces on his blog as click-bait (pieces designed to get viewers and to earn ad revenue and readership figures). As you can imagine, he has frustrated quite a few people while doing this.

I don't hold any animosity towards him, though. He is doing all of this out of insecurity. He needs a sense of validation because he operates in a world of accomplished people and he doesn't have the sticking power to accomplish similar things. His insecurity combined with his lack of social skills (as we covered earlier) have been the driving forces for his approach. As such, I feel a sense of empathy with him which puts his comments in perspective.

This is pretty common with a lot of people – their anti-social behavior is often the result of an underlying set of pressures to make them feel more relevant or whole as a human being. Try to determine what these pressures are in your commentators and it will help put a lot of things in perspective.

Information

The Ubuntu project that I work with is a global community that has always attracted press interest and headlines about the work of the community. In my capacity as community manager I have also become something of a public representative of the project. As you may imagine, I get quite a bit of feedback from people, some good and some not so good.

The company that employs me is Canonical, and at Canonical we drive much of the direction of Ubuntu. While the Ubuntu project is open, we hire a large number of people to work on the project and Canonical was started by the founder of Ubuntu, so by definition Canonical is seen as a leader in the community.

One of the challenges that I have discovered over the years is that people in a position of public interest are always privy to information that their audience isn't.

As an example, I know aspects of the bigger picture at Canonical, I know the people doing the work, I have worked long enough with the executive team that I know they can be trusted, and I know many of the common requirements that

customers, vendors and others need that help to guide our decision-making. In other words, my position and employment affords me information and context that our community members don't have.

Earlier we talked about how experience and age can illuminate the bigger picture and people without the visibility of that picture can often get frustrated, despite it not being your fault. Well, not only is the absence of age and experience one factor, but the absence and desire for information can be a huge contributing force of anti-social conduct as well.

Recently I have seen both sides of this.

A while back the Playstation 4 (PS4) was released. I went and bought one and I have been getting into gaming. As part of this, I read various PS4 communities, blogs, Twitter feeds and more.

In my capacity as a PS4 fan I have a thirst for information. When I don't get information about things I care about I have enough context of working for a sizable software company to know there are often good reasons why the information is not available, but I still feel the frustration of not having it. For those PS4 fans who don't have that experience of working in software, it is just plain frustrating, hence a lot of angry commentary.

Conversely, I work for a company that can't always share information, so I understand how it feels to be on the other side of the fence when I see frustrated comments. I understand though the perfectly legitimate reason why the information can't be shared (e.g. partner NDAs).

So, always bear in mind that the information and context you have may make your communications make perfect sense to you, but when that piece of the picture is missing to others, it might not make as much sense.

Access

Closely related to information is also a desire to have access to the people who make decisions.

The expectations around access are entirely different depending on the people involved.

As an example, in the communities where I work today, there is a high level of expectation that people can get access to me. Everyone knows my email address and how to get in touch.

Access gets more complicated though for more public figures where there needs to be a delicate balance between being accessible and the practicalities of managing a large audience. Even if you wanted to, it would be impossible to provide access to everyone.

One person who has experienced this first-hand is Mike Shinoda, founder of Grammy award-winning rock band *Linkin Park*. I talked to Mike about his experiences of being someone in a position of influence and how he has dealt with access. He shared:

I think what a lot of people really want, regardless of what they're saying, is to be engaged by the artist. They may try to get attention by saying something sweet, saying something nasty, or by appealing to another emotion ("it's my birthday, retweet me" or "I just got in a car accident, a RT would really pick me up"). I only engage when it's a positive, constructive, or funny thing.

As you can see, everyone has different expectations about how much access is available to them and how they go about gaining it. This expectation is often driven by visibility; the more visible you are, the less access people feel they get to you, and in some cases the more creative they need to be to gain it.

While some may expect you to be less accessible if you are more visible, unfortunately this can also cause some to assume that you care less about the "common man and woman" and that you may be uninterested in their feedback and ideas (due to all that fame you enjoy).

Over the years Mike has been passionate about counteracting this view while fulfilling this need for access. He has though been cognizant that there will always be *disagreeable* and in some case *unacceptable* commentary:

When we started the band, most people who came to our shows signed up to our mailing list with a name and physical address, because they didn't have email yet. Since then, we've seen our online activity and community move many places, from message boards to MySpace and chat rooms to Facebook to Twitter and Instagram and beyond. In each space, there are always people who want to get attention by being the loudest and most negative. There are other people who are simply young, immature, ignorant, or misinformed. I try to give them the benefit of the doubt and treat them kindly, but when someone proves to be a negative person, I just picture them as whatever character that diffuses or explains their comment.

As Mike's example demonstrates, you can indeed strike the right balance of access, but it does require the combination of rewarding respectful discussion and putting the non-respectful commentary into perspective, as we discuss throughout this book.

Before we move on, always bear in mind that visibility is relative. While you may not be as well known as Mike Shinoda and Linkin Park, there may be people in your slice of the world who see you in a similarly visible way. The need for access affects all walks of life.

4. The Medium

Another important area that affects how we communicate is the medium we are using to communicate in. That may be face-to-face discussions, phone, email, social media, chat channels, sign language or anything else.

Now, it would be spectacularly dull for most of you if I went through every medium one by one and explained how different bits of that medium contribute to how people communicate. Instead I am going to run through the implications that span multiple mediums; this gets us to the good stuff much more quickly.

Anonymity

I am not the first person to note that the Internet can provide a blanket of anonymity for many people. Many sites and services don't require any kind of formal identification, and it is easy to communicate with a nickname and register with a throwaway free email address.

Now, it would be easy to presume that anonymity would be primarily the domain of people who have something to hide or don't want to be accountable for their actions. This isn't always the case.

Sure, there are trolls and childish idiots who act under an anonymous identity, but there are also people who have professional or sensitive careers they need to keep private (e.g. security services, police, army) or are posting in an oppressive regime and want to protect themselves from their governments. There are also people who don't want to identify an aspect of who they are (e.g. some women prefer to be anonymous to avoid unwanted or misogynistic attention from men).

The primary impact that anonymity has on communications is *trust*.

When someone is using their real identity to contribute to a discussion, there is an implicit sense of accountability; they are associating their words to their person. This immediately grows a base-line level of trust between the sender and receiver. This base-line level of trust does not exist when the sender is anonymous.

Anonymity is not as simple as you might expect though, and there are two levels of anonymity we should consider.

Firstly, some people use a *ghost* identity. This is where they use an anonymous identity that isn't their name (e.g. "cat-lover52" or something else) but use the same identity for their comments every time. As such, there is a sense of ac-

accountability between their words and an identity, but that identity is not tied to their actual person. This is quite common, particularly in reference to the career/social/regime justifications that we just covered.

Secondly, people can use *throwaway* identities. This is where they change their identity every time they post. In my experience this is typically because they don't want a specific set of comments associated with their normal anonymous account, particularly in sensitive topics (e.g. if they respond to a thread about legal/sexual/health issues), or don't want any kind of accountability to anything they post online.

For the former of these two approaches, a ghost identity, it is very possible to build trust. This trust takes time to develop over a period of time. It is not too dissimilar to building trust with someone you don't know; in that case the sender's name (e.g. Joe Bloggs) is as equally unknown to you as *catlover52* would be. While *catlover52* doesn't have the baseline of trust that a real name has, trust can be developed nonetheless.

For the latter, throwaway accounts, trust is impossible to develop as there is no continuity of identity.

As such, when looking at anonymity in a medium, don't immediately presume that an anonymous account means that the person is up to no good; there may be compelling reasons for them to be anonymous, and there is a good opportunity to grow trust in the future if their identity remains consistent.

Anonymity however can be a sign of people who lack accountability, particularly with throwaway accounts, so also consider this as a potential driving force for anti-social communications.

Cultural and Social Norms

Every medium has an intrinsic set of cultural and social norms within it. Whether it is not invading someone's personal space in a face-to-face setting or not using all capital letters in an email, there are lots of subtle conventions.

It is tempting to presume that people who don't stick to these conventions don't know what they are talking about, or should be taken less seriously. In many cases people have great feedback, ideas, and thoughts, but they just don't know the intricacies of the medium.

For example, a guy joined a user group that I formed some years back and proceeded to break every possible rule, social convention, and principle in the group. He frustrated many, and as people tried to help him to understand his mistakes and the problems he was causing, he reacted to their feedback in a rather juvenile and dismissive manner. This further demonstrated his lack of knowledge of the cultural and social norms in the medium; he saw other people as merely text on a screen as opposed to being real people.

As such, before long some members of the group lit their torches and called for his ousting. As my email inbox filled up, so did the frustration of the group.

Although there was little doubt that he was a frustrating force in an otherwise calm community, I had a hunch that inexperience of the medium was the root cause of the problems and that he had the ability to change. I reached out to him to get a better idea of his experience and it turned out he was pretty new to online communities. I held strong with the wider group, and encouraged patience among my fellow community members. Before long, we started to see an improvement.

As the guy spent more time in the community he learned how it worked, began to take part in the culture as opposed to questioning it, and eventually became one of the most proficient and well-respected members. Today others look to him for advice and guidance; it just took him a little while to get there.

Always remember that the cultural and social norms in a community can be difficult for some people to detect (particularly if they lack social skills), so they may not be operating from the benefit of that knowledge. This combined with other elements we have already discussed such as experience, age, and anonymity can seem like a cocktail of potential problems, but it may be a well-grounded person who hasn't figured out the cultural norms yet and could benefit from some mentoring.

Rhythm and Cadence

Another important consideration is the rhythm and cadence of a discussion and how the medium impacts that.

As an example, imagine you are in a face-to-face discussion with someone and they give you some fairly direct criticism. You now wait 5 or 6 seconds before responding. That gap (and silence) would throw a really awkward pause into the discussion. The gap would be pretty noticeable, potentially giving the impression to the other person that their feedback either really resonated with you or really upset you.

Now, in an online chat conversation, a 5 or 6 second gap does not have the same effect. Any number of things could have got in the way to cause the gap (dinner is ready, your connection is slow etc).

Likewise, in a face-to-face setting, a firehose of comments is pretty normal in a debate. Compare that to Twitter – anything more than four consecutive tweets in a row within the same minute can seem aggressive and pressuring.

Always try to consider the social norms when it comes to cadence in each meeting. Again, an unusual cadence combined with a lack of social skills could point to a lack of experience of communicating as opposed to someone deliberately trying to be problematic. Try to get a handle on this before you incorrectly judge that someone may be a trouble-maker. Sometimes a little gentle guidance about better methods of communicating with others (shared in a non-patronizing way) can help alleviate the situation.

5. Your Relationship With Others

In the last two chapters, we have explored how the ingredients that make us human and the medium that we communicate in can affect our style, methods, and tone when communicating with others.

While these two areas are important, they fundamentally deal with our own attributes and our perception of the attributes in a medium. Importantly though, what often really defines how we communicate is not just personal attributes but the nature of our relationships with other people.

You can think of the last two chapters as the foundational pieces on what makes us human and how we use the communication mediums available to us. In this chapter we will connect together the dots in how we communicate with other people who also have those human ingredients and share the medium.

Influence and why People Care

People are social creatures. We start our lives in families, we are part of local communities, and we often plug into wider communities on the Internet. Throughout our lives we have peer groups, people who inspire us, and people who challenge us. Even the most ardent of independent thinkers is susceptible to influence from others; they may not follow the norm in their community, but they sure as hell have a set of people who influence and inspire them.

As such, the influence that we have on each other plays an important role in how we communicate.

Most people tend to associate influence with *inspiration*, and this is definitely part and parcel of our daily lives. As an example, one of my biggest inspirations in life is Nicko McBrain, who plays drums in Iron Maiden. His personality, his musicianship, his sense of humor, his drive...they all inspire me as a person, even outside of music.

In a similar manner, influence can have the opposite impact. As an example, take a look at any political leader, be it Barack Obama, George W. Bush, Winston Churchill, or anyone else. Those with influence and power generate criticism at every turn because their critics see their influence as a risk. This is why every leader of a country makes certain people want to protest their actions, views, and policies, with some going so far as to camp outside government offices in protest.

Exactly the same inspirational and objectionable nature of influence happens further down the social pyramid, and it is important that you understand your own level of influence on the people who consume and follow your work as well as how others influence you.

Let's look at a few examples.

Firstly, take a popular music star such as Justin Bieber. Everything Bieber does is judged under the spotlight of his influence; he is a hugely successful, very visible artist who millions of young people and children look up to. As such, when he steps out of line in an obnoxious but hardly ground-shaking manner (such as having loud parties and annoying his neighbors), his level of influence means that people are often more critical than they need to be for fear of the example he sets to his audience, many of which are young and impressionable.

In a similar but much more down-to-earth manner, and much more personally, in my work as the Ubuntu Community Manager I have a level of influence in Canonical (the company behind Ubuntu) and the community itself. Here my influence, while much smaller than Bieber's, is more about what I can do to change and adjust a community that people care about. As such, my words and actions are put under the spotlight; if someone believes I am good or bad for Ubuntu, their communication with me or about me will be influenced by this.

In another example, influence can come from those who don't have leadership or power but have a loud and very vocal voice. Take for example someone who responds to every comment from a movie studio publisher with long, critical diatribes about the faults of the studio. The commenter may not have any reputation or leadership in the community or organization but the regularity of feedback can influence people to get into heated debates with that person out of worry that other readers may believe them. This is the classic "I can't go to bed yet, people on the Internet are wrong and I need to correct them" scenario.

The key lesson here is that we need to understand how much real and practical influence we have, and the likely impact of that influence on people who consume our work. When we understand this we can (a) tune our communications better, and (b) understand why some people react the way they do. Let's look at a few subtle aspects that affect influence.

Perception vs. Reality

There is a huge difference between *perception* and *reality*. You may have the very best of intentions and the reality of what you do may reflect that, but if the perception is different, the perception will often win out.

Take for example a video game publisher who releases a game that doesn't work very well. Imagine there are two or three weeks of radio silence after the release as internally the publisher figures out how to respond. By the time the publisher starts releasing fixes and resolving the issues the perception may be that the publisher doesn't care about their customers. The publisher may be channeling all of their resources in order to resolve the problems, with everyone working late nights to get it fixed, but once the perception is set, it is difficult to shift it.

This happens *all the time* when we communicate. Just go and look at any YouTube video, online discussion, or newspaper; in many, many cases you will see criticism that is entirely based upon perception as opposed to evidence.

Earlier I mentioned how the gap of information between people in positions of influence (e.g. a movie studio) and those who are not (e.g. a fan) can cause anti-social conduct. This is particularly relevant here: if someone's perception of you is critical because they don't have the information to demonstrate you are acting in good faith, it will only grow that perception (particularly if that information is difficult or impossible to obtain).

My philosophy here has always been consistent: my goal is not to prove that people are incorrect in their views or convince them to agree with me. My goal is instead to ensure the flow of facts, reduce mis-information and maintain good conduct (i.e. stay classy and accountable). These actions will speak for themselves and slowly change the perception of those who are critical. I recommend you use the same philosophy in your communications as well.

Fear and Paranoia

An unfortunate attribute of influence is the role that *fear* plays. As discussed earlier, we have a range of insecurities and attributes that affect our communication and if our perception of someone is negative (often based on lack of information), the result of this can often be fear ("oh my god, what are they going to do to screw us?").

In these cases, a vicious circle can develop. Fear may be the emotional result of an inaccurate perception and lack of information, but the domino effect of fear in people who feel vulnerable is *paranoia*.

When paranoia sets in, every action of the influencer is judged through an inaccurate and heavily distorted lens that they are deliberately up to no good.

We can see this paranoia at work in many different parts of the world. A common example here is the paranoia of the heavily entrenched political commentators in the large American media outlets. To a staunch Republican, the Democrats have an extreme liberal agenda to make a bigger government who will take all of our money and give it to lazy jobless yobs. To a staunch Democrat, the Republicans hate the poor and only care about making the rich richer and care more about big businesses than helping the helpless. The reality is that neither of these positions are true as a general rule (both parties do have some whack-jobs though), but paranoia and fear plays a large part in the narrative that the American public is subjected to as either side tries to score points against each other.

Fear and paranoia drives more of our discussion than you would expect and the best anti-dote we have here is *evidence*. Let evidence be your guide in how you assess people and situations, and bring clarity to their fear and paranoia with evidence as well.

In these situations our goal is to build trust with the person who is fearful. Help them to understand that your intentions are honorable by demonstrating it with evidence.

Of course, this will not sway the most paranoid of individuals (as they will mis-trust all evidence from certain sources), but evidence will clearly demonstrate to the less-paranoid and other on-lookers that your conduct is honorable.

Patterns and Reputation

When we started this journey I covered the four ingredients that are present in every communication; *sender, content, tone, and context*.

The last of these, *context*, is important not only for determining factors that may add stress to a situation (e.g. jet-lag), but when we see patterns in context it can help us to better assess the sender. We can also use this to our advantage in our own work.

Some time ago a contributor joined a community that I work with and he started making great contributions. As time went on he started becoming increasingly picky and dismissive. He was quite inexperienced and young which added to these challenges, and his pattern of behavior became consistent – write something controversial, have a long debate in the comments, period of silence, repeat.

For the first six months or so the posts he made were so infrequent that the pattern didn't form for a while. Before long though, he started developing a reputation that he was quite divisive. On one hand the small number of people who also shared his critical views saw him as regularly bringing "honest" feedback, and on the other hand some people thought he caused trouble unnecessarily. Either way, his pattern of behavior was well understood by his readers.

Keep an eye open for these patterns with people who communicate with you. Understanding how patterns can tell a story about the sender and context of a communication is really helpful. When you know the sender is always behaving a certain way and the context is part of that standard pattern, you know the person is not necessarily being all that objective.

This is also an important justification for you to always demonstrate objective, calm, collected, unemotional behavior; your pattern and reputation will reflect this too.

Note

Remember, different people have different views on what behavior is considered acceptable and unacceptable. If you feel like someone is acting anti-socially, I recommend you share your feedback with them. Don't be brash and don't be aggressive, but sometimes people simply don't realize the way their behavior is perceived and constructive feedback can often help find a better middle ground.

Ego

The final consideration when it comes to influence is *ego*.

Ego can be a subtle beast. In some cases people are very direct with their ego ("I sometimes forget that people consider me to be such an intelligent and well written world expert on this particular area") or it can be more subtle ("oh, I assumed I would get to speak at the conference due to my reputation and knowledge").

Irrespective, ego is bad for people and for communities. I have written at length elsewhere about ego and the risks associated. I speak from personal experience...I started developing an ego some years back, but fortunately I mainly kept it to myself, and my best friend helped me to course-correct. In a nutshell though, I thought I was a bit of a big-shot. Ugh, I feel embarrassed just thinking about it, let alone writing about it.

Here is the secret when it comes to ego: if you are as good as you think you are, other people will tell others about you or they will see it themselves. If you feel the need to tell others about how good you are, this points to ego which often in turn points to insecurities that you are dealing with.

As I have gotten older I have discovered that the people I (and many others) respect most are self-deprecating and humble. They are good people who are good at what they do, but they don't ram it down our throats.

My recommendations here are simple. Firstly, always look for ego in others as a driving force; it usually points to insecurity (see my comments earlier about *validation* too). Secondly, *don't become that person*. Be good at what you do and let your work speak for itself. You don't need to narrate your capabilities to others.

Note

The point about insecurity being a common cause of ego is also an opportunity. If you see ego in other people it can be a good opportunity to reach out to them, gently share that you have noticed the ego, and ask if they are doing OK. Invariably the insecurity may come out in the discussion and you can help re-assure them and give them confidence.

6. Creating our Code

At this point in our journey we know how to categorize communications (*agreeable, disagreeable, unacceptable*), determine which ingredients to assess in each communication (*sender, content, tone, context*), and the different factors that influence those attributes (*human ingredients, the medium, relationships*).

In this chapter we are going to boil all of this knowledge down into a code that we will follow to guide how we communicate with others. This code will become the foundation on which our interaction with others is built.

This code is designed to keep us calm and collected and be able to interpret challenging and fiery communications elegantly.

I have three important goals:

1. Help you to be able to process and deal with any kind of communication, irrespective of what it is or where it comes from.
2. Build a culture around you of receiving and responding to quality feedback.
3. Develop your reputation as a mature and well-grounded communicator with credibility in your field.

While many of you will have picked up this book to learn the first goal and mentally process and cope with challenging communications, we shouldn't stop there. If we build a standard and quality of communication for ourselves that rewards and respects high quality, polite, constructive discussion, we will by definition get a higher grade of feedback. Sure, there will always be trolls and haters, but we will demonstrate responsiveness and accountability to others who show us the same respect we show them.

Following the guidance in this chapter will help us with the latter of the two goals in particular; we will be calm, collected, objective communicators.

Becoming Well Grounded

Achieving the goals we just covered essentially boils down to being a sophisticated communicator. We want to ensure we assess situations with evidence and perspective, demonstrate good, patient conduct, and take responsibility for our conduct and engagement.

As such, I have broken our code in this chapter down into these three categories:

1. Accuracy – we always want to have informed opinions based upon evidence and assess our interactions with others within the wider context of the world.
2. Conduct – our conduct should be calm, collected, and professional, and we should know when is a good time to engage and disengage.
3. Responsibility – we should always take responsibility for our words and actions.

Let's now go through each category and explore the different parts of our code that will help you to be a strong and sophisticated communicator.

Accuracy

The vast majority of conflict, disagreements, and arguments are based upon unrealistic and inaccurate views of the world.

There are many examples here. As one such example, in politics many heavily partisan people can often only see the benefits of their party and the failings in the opposition. Everything they see is seen through this heavily biased lens. When challenged they fail to be independent in their assessment of the situation and their cases are often built on presumption as opposed to evidence.

This is a *terrible* way to do things and a pretty miserable way to live. Life is an incredible adventure filled with wonderful people and ideas; to only see the world one way is like only ever tasting the same flavors as opposed to exploring a rich range of tastes and textures.

It is essential that we have an accurate and balanced view of the people we are communicating with and the topics we are discussing; this will ensure that our participation in these discussions is based on what we see and not what would like to see. If we don't get this right, everything else is built on an unstable foundation.

There are some important rules that can guide our work.

Keep Things in Perspective

As we have discussed, there is no silver bullet for dealing with disrespectful, anti-social people. Fortunately though, there is a mind-set and ethos that you can subscribe to that will significantly help resolve these issues.

Put simply, this entire book is about *perspective*. It is about the way in which we view the world, the people in it, and how they communicate with us.

Part of the problem we are solving here is the natural human defense mechanism that kicks in when we see hurtful comments. It is only natural to zone in on the criticism, prioritize it too highly, and assume everyone thinks the same...as if there is some conspiracy where no one has told you how much of an asshole you really are.

The good news is that this isn't true.

When we see hurtful comments we typically don't see them within the context of the wider world and our wider lives.

When we see these comments in perspective it helps us to keep a more accurate view of people and their views on our work. This helps us to prioritize good feedback from good people and not get dragged down by the haters.

Getting things in perspective is as simple as seeing that individual communication within the wider context of all the other communications and people you interact with. As an example, if you receive 100 great pieces of feedback and one unpleasant one, it is likely the negative communication is not what most people think. Unfortunately, the defense

mechanism we just talked about can quite easily have us ignore the 99 great pieces of feedback as we zone in on the single negative one.

Flipping things around, in some situations you may get more feedback that is unpleasant rather than positive. These are arguably the most challenging of situations, and it is these times more than ever when we need to balance all of the different ingredients we have covered thus far. Just because it seems that everyone disagrees with you, it doesn't necessarily mean you are doing anything wrong; some of our greatest leaders have led in the face of unrelenting opposition. As usual, chart your path forward with grace and respect for others, despite how challenging it can feel.

With this in mind, this entire book is about helping you to develop this sense of perspective. Our goal here is that when a communication comes in you can file it in *agreeable*, *disagreeable*, or *unacceptable* based upon all the different *human ingredients*, *the medium*, and the *relationships* we have already discussed. The code we are developing now is how we do this. This will stop the barbs hurting when you realize that the barbs are often an anomaly.

We have made good progress and we have covered a lot of important ground already. I have to be honest though; this is a journey. This is not going to change for you overnight. It will take you some time to learn how to mentally process communications and think laterally as opposed to just letting your heart and gut tell you how to process things.

Don't be surprised if this takes months or even years to master. You may also find your pendulum swings too far some times and you may become a little too resistant to the haters and not be able to process legitimate, respectful criticism. This is part and parcel of mastering this and developing perspective.

The good news is that you are on the right path and we are going to rock this, my friend.

Let Evidence be Your Guide

Most things are not as simple as they seem. While the outer edges of a problem, disagreement, or comment may seem simple, when we delve in further, we often find other elements that explain the mechanics of the situation much better.

We have already explored this in previous chapters; those *human ingredients* and factors that relate to the *medium* and *relationships* all influence why people react the way they do. There are many of these mechanics inside a situation. As such, it is important that we always focus on *evidence* and not assumption when assessing these mechanics.

This is a common component in conflict resolution. As an example, a friend of ours came to visit one day and started complaining about her parents. She was living at home at the time and was convinced that her parents were both deliberately trying to control her, limit her freedom, and pick fights. This story was presented to us in a deeply emotional and frustrated tone and manner.

When I started asking questions about the different pieces in the story, it turned out that the situation was really quite different. She had moved in with her parents in her late twenties, and was not paying for anything; rent, food, bills, car etc.

When I asked about each individual incident it became clear that her parents were expecting her to live within the crisply defined rules of their house, which they considered reasonable as she was a guest in their home and not contributing financially. When I challenged her view that this was less about her parents playing games and more about their desire for her to take responsibility, her mindset entirely shifted and she understood the position of her parents.

What happened beneath the covers here was that her frustration clouded her judgment. Instead of her judging each individual incident independently and objectively, her frustration led her to see ill will in every move her parents made. As such, every interaction was seen through a deeply negative lens.

Now to be clear, this is human nature. When we are frustrated we often tend to see the world through this negative lens and often see conspiracy where none exists.

We can train ourselves to be more objective, however. So, even in the most frustrating and annoying of scenarios try to look at the events and actions of others from an almost legally provable perspective – do you have externally verifiable

proof and evidence that supports your interpretation? If you do, then so be it. If you don't, then you may well be resorting to unfair assumption and I promise you that this will bring complexity and problems where you really don't want them.

Read People

Before we go on, there is an important point we need to cover: there is often a subtle difference between very direct and focused communication and content that is anti-social. As part of being an *accurate* communicator, we don't want to jump to conclusions about the nature or intentions of someone.

It took me a while to really understand the full scope of this, but everyone has their own style, approach, and assumptions when it comes to communicating with others.

A good example of this is when you go out to dinner with your friends. Some people will be more active in the conversation, some will spend most of the evening listening, and some will chip in when they feel the need to. Some people will be more controversial and enjoy stoking the fire with edgy discussion topics. Everyone is different, and one key distinction is in how *direct* some people can be.

This lesson came into view some years back when I started working with a fellow employee. We were due to have a meeting to discuss a project with a bunch of other people at one of our offices. Everyone else showed up to the meeting on time and we patiently waited for this guy to arrive. We knew he was in the office, but he must have been running late from another meeting or call or hit the bathroom.

He then came bustling into the room where we were already engaged in a conversation as we waited and he completely interrupted everyone. He sat down at the table, put his feet up, and then said "OK, let me tell you what I need you all to do". This was a guy who no one in the room reported to, who played one role in a wider team project...a guy who seemed to be clearly laying down the law in an environment where he had neither the social nor organizational authority to do so.

I sat there gob-smacked. I couldn't believe how brazen this guy was. I have always been a very direct and frank person in the way I work; I like to cut to the point and get to the specifics of what we are going to do. This was not direct, this more arrogant and egotistical.

Some years later, with a solid body of trust and friendship clearly defined, I recounted the story to him while we were in a bar one evening and I shared with him how arrogant I felt he was back then. When I told him this he said "sure, I know some people think I am arrogant, but you know what...I get things done".

I have gone on to discover that the world is *full* of people like this; good people who are often very effective at what they do, but they have no interest in small-talk, no interest in democratically deciding how to achieve their goals, and are not afraid to take control and rock the boat if needed. They just want to get on, do it, and get the outcome that they see in their minds.

When you are assessing the *sender* in a communication, try to be mindful that some folks are simply wired up this way. While you may not particularly like that method of communication, this is no reason to let the style of the communication get in the way of the content.

While I would advise you not to let this style of communicating with others frustrate and distract you, I would also recommend that you raise this as an issue with the person in question. In many cases people are simply not self-aware enough to realize they are being anti-social or awkward to work with, and some politely delivered feedback can help them to get a better balance. What is most critical here is to not confront this with passive aggression; thinly veiled jabs disguised as jokes and semi-confrontational language will neither solve the problem nor satiate your frustration.

Conduct

When you started reading this book I shared the four ingredients that are present in every communication; the *sender*, *content*, *tone*, and *context*. The way in which we engage with each of these four ingredients defines the quality of our conduct, and the quality of our conduct is the most important way in which others judge us on how we communicate and perform our work.

It is as simple as this: most people simply don't like people who demonstrate rude or condescending conduct when they communicate. If you are aggressive (passive or otherwise), belittling, or just simply act like a dick to other people, you will be on a fast track to people questioning your credibility. You will not only lose respect but people won't want to be around you.

For most people, demonstrating good conduct is fairly straight-forward when others are being agreeable. It is easy to be nice to other nice people. The real challenge is when others communicate in a *disagreeable* or *unacceptable* manner. This is usually when even those with the best standards of personal conduct have their ugly alter-ego make an appearance.

As such, our goal here is to always stay a cut above the rest when it comes to our conduct. Fortunately, we have simple parts of our code that we can follow here to keep us on the right track.

Stay Classy

To help us with developing our perspective I have one important part of our code for you to strive for in every single day of your life. This rule can be applied both online or offline, with friends or colleagues, and in any situation and any context. It will help with all three of our goals that we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter and will help you to grow as a person both in terms of handling feedback and growing your reputation with others.

So what is this majestic, diamond-encrusted, maximum-strength, part of our code? Well, it is simple.

Stay classy.

In every communication, debate, and conflict scenario you engage in, you should *stay classy*. Never lose your temper, never lose your cool, always remain polite and respectful, and always be in control of your emotions and your temper.

Time and time again history has taught us that the worst things in life happen when we don't stay classy. When we personalize situations, over-react, fly off the handle, or however else you want to describe it...we lose control of the situation and either embarrassing and/or undesirable consequences result.

Remember, getting angry and shouting at people is the easy way out. I am not here to share the easy way; I am here to share the *right way*.

Staying classy is not just about staying cool in testing situations. It is also about not resorting to cheap shots, insults, and other tacky approaches to make your point or get one over your critic.

This reminds me of a time when the company I work for was getting a lot of politically motivated criticism from one of our competitors. These individuals were turning fairly innocent differences in viewpoints and strategy into controversies designed to inflict injury on our work and community. These comments were often personally motivated and condescending.

It could have been tempting to retaliate in a similar manner and throw snarky criticisms, accusations and other nonsense in their direction, but I told my team I will absolutely not tolerate this behavior with our competitors. We may have been the target of what I considered pretty deplorable behavior at times, but that was no justification for us to stoop to that level. I am proud that we stuck to our values of staying classy.

To be clear, our code here does not mean we should not hold people accountable for their actions. If you get an *unacceptable* communication from someone and you feel the right course of action is to report them formally, or take some other course of action, do so.

The key point here is that we react to situations with a cool head, put them in context, and always, always be polite, respectful, and step above any petty bickering. This is about being the bigger person, not having the last word.

Staying classy is not easy for everyone. For most of us this is a journey. It will take time to mentally develop not only the skill of staying classy, but also to demonstrate restraint and resist the urge to react in testing situations. You will get there; practice makes perfect and every ounce of energy you invest in this will serve you well in your future.

Of course, there will be some mis-steps. You may go for a few months and then one person will come out of no-where when you are jet-lagged and you tell them where they can stick their opinions (spoiler alert: the sun still rarely, if ever shines there).

Even in those situations we can stay classy. We hold ourselves accountable for our actions, sincerely apologize and move on. Even when we make mistakes we can stay classy in how we are accountable to our mistakes, own them, and respond appropriately.

Value Your Time

When it comes to discussions, debates, and arguments, there are broadly three types of people in the world:

1. People who are not interested in getting involved at all.
2. People who participate in the discussion until they feel all perspectives and viewpoints have been shared sufficiently.
3. People who want to have the last word.

When we suddenly get embroiled in a discussion, debate, or argument, our goal is to be #2. Not getting involved in any discussion (#1) has the down-side of not challenging our minds and getting us outside of our comfort zones. Demonstrating unparalleled devotion to win the debate/argument and have the last word (#3) is a waste of your and other people's time.

Your time is valuable. It is a non-renewable resource that is constantly running out.

Here's the secret: every debate and argument has a shelf life. It can only go on for so long until it stops serving anyone's purpose beyond the most devoted few who will fight for the last word. In almost every scenario the very people who entered the debate with an entrenched view will leave with the very same view. This is because they are not interested in the exchange of ideas, they are interested in "winning". These people are short-sighted and a waste of your time.

As such, it is important that you are always considering the cost of your time in getting wrapped up in these discussions. Each time you are about to contribute to the debate, assess whether there is anything new you are saying. If there isn't, it is probably a good time to bow out. When I press the eject button I usually say something such as:

I think we have discussed the topic in depth and we are very clear on each other's views. As such, I am bowing out of the debate and we can agree to disagree.

This elegantly removes you from the debate while respecting the fact that other people have differing viewpoints.

Now, in some scenarios someone will question the notion of agreeing to disagree. This is just bait to bring you back in, so ignore it. In any case, if they can't agree to disagree, they are by definition unwilling to accept contrasting viewpoints and will be a waste of time and energy to debate with anyway.

Responsibility

So far our code has centered around being accurate and respectful communicators. The final, and possibly the most important set of values in a truly great communicator is *responsibility*.

Our words are powerful. Within the magic mix of people and contexts, our words can inspire or hurt within a moment. In the majority of societies we have free will to choose our words and as such we get to choose how others will hear, read, and interpret them.

Unfortunately, some people take a blunt approach to their choice of words. This is beyond being direct and frank with a foundation of respect. They are of the view that the top priority is their right to say what they want, with little or no consideration for the impact of those words as soon as they have left their mouths or keyboards.

This is an immature and flawed perspective. Our words are a direct reflection on us and our views, principles, opinions, and ideas. If we choose to share those views, principles, opinions, and ideas, we should be willing to be responsible for the consequences of them.

Let's look at some important additions to our code for how we do this.

Be Accountable

A key contributing factor to being a responsible communicator is to be accountable for your words and actions. It is important that we touch on this briefly as every so often I see a scenario play out that I find rather disappointing and I would hate for you to be another casualty here.

It works like this: someone posts a topic to their website, social media site or otherwise that is critical or controversial. This person can either be a community member, commentator, employee or anyone else; it doesn't matter who the person is.

A series of comments are then posted in response from readers that are critical of the post, thus challenging the author on their views. The author then either deletes the post and comments or disables the comments based on the feedback. In other words, a viewpoint is shared, an invitation for comment is provided, but that invitation is then revoked when the author of the post is dissatisfied with the response from their readers.

I have seen this happen countless times over the years and I strongly suggest against it.

We should all be accountable for our words. Actions have consequences, and so do words.

As such, when I see someone openly share their thoughts and invite their readers to provide comments, I see that as a wonderful demonstration of accountability and engagement; debate is a beautiful thing when executed with politeness and respect. To then close that door, seemingly because people disagree with you, is in my mind the equivalent of walking out of a room in the middle of a debate. The excuse when folks are criticized of this behavior is typically:

It is my blog/page/site and I can run it how I like.

This is true: it *is* your blog/page/site, and you can run it how you like, but the true measure of a person is not just in what they say, but also in the conversation and discourse that follows.

Now, there are two very important caveats to my view here. Firstly, abusive, threatening, or otherwise offensive content (*unacceptable* communications) are perfect candidates for removal and banning the commentator. We should never tolerate this. Secondly, I can understand the removal of a post if there is a legal requirement to do so. In the majority of cases where I have seen posts removed or comments disabled though, it has been for neither of these reasons.

Speaking personally, I have never, ever, switched off comments on my posts or deleted posts. Even when the Internet has seemingly come to get me, or when the press pick up on something and are critical, or when I have made a mistake and felt embarrassed at the outcome...I have never switched off comments and never deleted a blog post. This is because I feel I should be accountable for my words.

For me, this is an ethical issue; in the same way I won't go and re-write or edit an article if I get criticism for it (outside of minor grammatical/spelling fixes). My articles and blog posts are time capsules of my thinking at that point in my life. For me to go and edit them would be for me to rewrite history. A blog is not a regularly updated record of your views (like a book), it is a chronological diary of your views and progression as a person. Consequently, my blog is filled with moments from my past that don't reflect my views, experience, or ideas of today. Some of those posts are even embarrassing. But you know what, those posts stay unchanged, and I am proud that I have never compromised on this accountability.

So with this in mind, I have a simple suggestion for those of you who run blogs/pages/sites: either switch your comments off entirely or always leave them on, but don't turn them off when you don't like the reaction from your audience. Polite and respectful debate helps us grow as human beings, helps us evolve our ideas and perspectives, and makes us better people. Let history be our record, not our edited version of history.

Have Empathy

One of the primary causes of pain and suffering in the world, be it something as heinous as a violent crime or something as benign as a spat between friends, is a lack of *empathy*.

Empathy is simply the ability to share, preempt, and understand someone else's feelings and emotions. Empathy is a valuable attribute in human beings; it stops us from pursuing a solely selfish path due to the consideration of how our actions affect others.

Empathy is what makes us human. For most people, the reason they would not murder someone is not because there is a law that says they can't do it, it is because they understand the pain and suffering that it would inflict not just on the person, but also on that person's family, children, friends, and the local community.

Empathy is what has bound civilization together for thousands of years, and invariably our biggest problems in societies and cultures are those who lack empathy and an understanding of what it feels like to be another person.

We should strive to have empathy with others not only in terms of how we read and interpret the views and perspectives of others, but also when we share our own views and opinions. There are going to be times in all of our lives when we say things that hurt others, but we should always strive to have empathy for others. This does not mean people can act however they like and empathy gives them a get-out-of-jail-free card; sometimes people are being mean, but we should consciously make the empathy judgment call anyway as opposed to merely assuming mean-spirited behavior.

In Summary

In this chapter we have laid down what I consider to be the most critical core guidelines that will help us to be an effective communicator, build a culture in which we reward good conduct, and to develop a reputation as a grounded, respectful, capable communicator.

These are by no means the only aspects of our code. Over the coming months and years you are going to find other values to live by that you can add to your code that will help to guide you in your journey. Just being cognizant of a set of guidelines that define us as good people is a great start.

7. Pulling Together The Threads

When we started our journey I mentioned that I wanted to keep this book fairly short and to the point. I think now is a good time to pull together the many different topics we have touched on to bring the overall picture into view.

This entire book is about understanding the driving forces behind why people communicate the way they do and crafting a code that we can use to manage those communications and mentally categorize them.

It is about resisting the urge to only read the words in a communication and instead see the different pieces of the person to help keep things in perspective.

To do this we started out by reviewing the three different buckets of communications, *agreeable*, *disagreeable*, and *unacceptable*, and how they work, and then went on to discuss the four attributes in every communication, *content*, *tone*, *sender*, and *context*, that we evaluate to determine which bucket a communication goes in.

With an understanding of how people tick as a core part of managing communications with others, we next took a whistle-stop tour of the human condition.

We first covered the many human ingredients that define who we are as people, *age*, *gender*, *cultural influences*, *social skills*, and *experience*; each of which plays a role in what defines us as people, our ideas, opinions, and perspectives.

We then covered psychological factors such as *stress* and *burnout* as well as the needs that all of us have; *validation*, *information*, and *access*.

Next we explored attributes that apply to the different media we communicate in that influence our conduct and others' perception of our conduct; *anonymity*, *cultural and social norms*, *rhythm*, and *cadence*.

We rounded off our evaluation of the human condition with many of the things that affect our relationships with others in the form of *influence*, *perception vs. reality*, *fear*, *paranoia*, *patterns*, *reputation*, and *ego*.

At this point in our journey we had a good understanding of what makes people tick, much of which can help us to break down and understand those four ingredients in every communication (*content*, *tone*, *sender*, and *context*) that help us file communications in our three buckets (*agreeable*, *disagreeable*, and *unacceptable*).

Finally, we defined a code that guides our conduct and how we deal with anti-social and challenging people.

This included:

- Accuracy
 - Keep Things In Perspective
 - Let Evidence be Your Guide
 - Read People
- Conduct
 - Stay Classy
 - Value Your Time
- Responsibility
 - Be Accountable
 - Have Empathy

Our code is what helps us to take all of these different ingredients in communications, people, and media and glue them together into a set of principles that helps us become sophisticated communicators and to handle any kind of situation that can be thrown at us.

Onwards and Upwards

Most people are good people.

I said this right at the beginning of this book and I still have as much belief in people as ever. As we have explored, when you strip away the computers, clothes, cars, modern conveniences, TVs, game consoles and everything else...we are fragile creatures with a core set of ingredients that influence how we think, how we behave, and how we interact with others.

As I was going through my own journey that led me to discover the topics covered here, understanding these core principles was in a strange way *re-assuring*. For many years I was nervous that I was an overly optimistic guy who was some-what naive when it came to people. When others were quick to dismiss someone as an anti-social asshole, I found myself trying to understand why they behaved the way they did, as opposed to chastising them for their behavior. I was worried that one day I would ultimately discover that most people are assholes and that my faith in people would be eroded.

Thankfully I have discovered the opposite. Most people are good people with dreams, ideas, and ambitions. People are creative and love to be inspired, love to be engaged, and have a natural sense for doing good. People want to belong and have meaningful relationships with others and feel a sense of accomplishment.

When the inverse of these good things happen and the animal in us rears its head, there are usually good reasons. I hope *Dealing With Disrespect* has helped to shine a light on some of these reasons to keep that sense of humanity bright in your world too. Stay well.