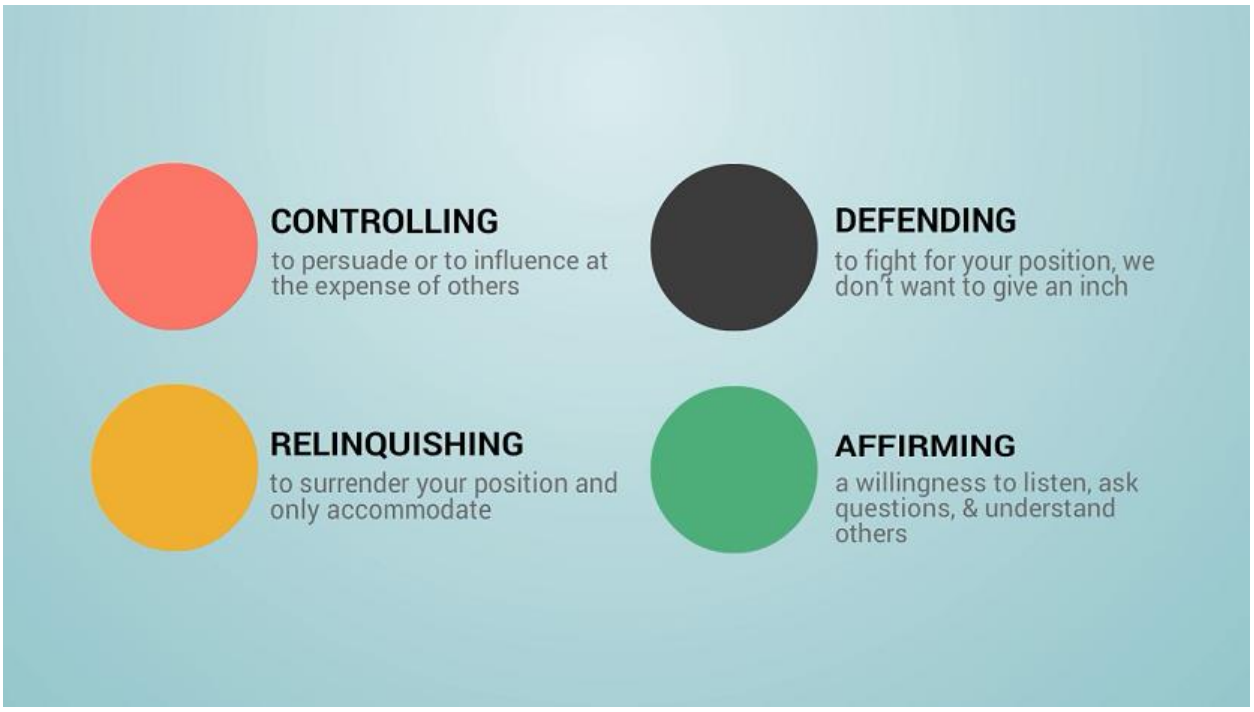
The Four Types of Intent

All communication is comprised of three elements: style, intent, and content. **Intent** is the most basic. The underlying force behind every communication.



Intent is always the first thing people hear. If it is a positive intent, it sets the stage for productive communication. If it is negative, it can overwhelm everything that is said and make words meaningless. You set the tone with your intent.

Here are three important keys to keep in mind:

- A positive, **affirming intent** paves the way for open communication. It enables people to feel relaxed and communicate in their natural style.
- By using a **tone** that communicates your desire to hear what the other person is saying, you lay the foundation for trust and mutual respect.
- "Remember, every communication is two conversations, the spoken content and the **body language**. The body language always trumps the content when the two are in conflict." – Nick Morgan, Power Cues

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You have to be a master of your intent before you can become an effective communicator.

For example, if a colleague is speaking angrily, you will no longer pay attention to what they are saying. Instead, you'll be asking: What got them so upset? What do I have to do to get out of this situation? What's wrong with him or her?

Conversely, if a colleague is speaking with positive intent, then you will listen carefully to what they say and feel comfortable responding in the same manner.

Many of us recognize the power of intent when we speak to our pets. You can smile and use a happy, high-pitched, friendly voice and say, "Oh, Spot, you are such a bad, bad dog. You bark all the time. Don't you, you dumb little doggie?" Or, you can frown, point your finger, and use a deep, harsh voice to say, "You are a very good dog, Spot. I want you to be my pal forever."

The point is intent – not content – is the main thing that people listen and respond to.

The Four Types of Intent

There are four types of intent that underlie all communication: **affirming**, **controlling**, **defending**, and **withdrawing**. Everyone displays all four types of intent, but the object of excellent communicators is an affirming intent. Here's what each type of intent feels like.

Affirming Intent

Your mind is open, your body feels relaxed and confident, you feel open to hearing other points of view, you feel you're in a position of strength because you have a high level of confidence in the people around you. You know that the best outcome is likely to come when everyone is sharing his or her points of view openly, no matter how challenging, letting the best rationale win the day.

To be able to communicate effectively, we need to have an affirming intent. It's reflected in a willingness to listen, to ask questions, to understand other peoples' points of view. It paves the way for the open sharing of ideas. When we affirm, we allow space for other peoples' ideas and knowledge to surface.

There are three other forms of intent. We use them as strategies to try to get things our way.

Controlling Intent

When we have a **controlling intent**, our purpose is to persuade or to influence at the expense of other points of view. There is little opportunity for sharing of ideas.

A controlling intent feels like this: Your mind is focused on achieving a specific outcome and advocating a specific position; you want to limit debate and discussion and options; you're not all that receptive to other points of view. Your body is somewhat stressed, you certainly don't feel relaxed. You're not confident that an open sharing of viewpoints will result in an outcome that is best – probably because you sense a conflict between your agenda and other people's.

Defending Intent

When we **defend**, our intent is to fight for our position. We don't want to give an inch. A controlling intent against a defending one can escalate into real conflict.

A defending intent feels like your mind is back-pedaling. You're trying to defend a position against what you perceive to be an attack. You can feel the emotion inside triggering higher levels of adrenaline. Your focus is on protecting yourself against an opponent whom you perceive to be formidable. Your pride and your reputation feel at stake. Typically your communication becomes shriller and more barbed, less relaxed and less productive.

Relinquishing Intent

When we relinquish, we surrender our position. We stop participating and only accommodate. At some level it is passive-aggressive communication – it's a way of saying, "I'm taking my marbles and going home." Relinquishing often occurs when we are matched up against a controlling intent.

A relinquishing or withdrawing intent feels like this: You feel burnt up. You have stopped talking and listening. You'd like to get up and walk out. Mentally you already have. The only thing preventing you from physically

removing yourself is the feeling that it would cause further embarrassment and damage to your reputation. Communication is done for the day until you have a chance to regroup and get a clearer perspective on your value to the group.

Which of types of intent do you see most? How much more productive would your workplace be if everyone used an affirming intent?

We exhibit controlling, relinquishing, and defending intents more often than we like to admit. When you feel yourself becoming defensive or controlling, tell people why you are feeling that way. **If you explain what is motivating you, and then inquire into the other person's concerns and motivations**, you can quickly defuse the situation and find your way back to the positive intent that ensures communication will be productive.

Communicating with Positive Intent

It's easy to have an affirming intent when you feel comfortable with the people around you. When your intent is affirming, then your communication is naturally open, relaxed, and friendly. You are curious to hear other people's ideas; you're open to sharing your own. In short, you're a brilliant communicator.

The challenge comes when you feel threatened. All of a sudden your intent shifts into a controlling or defending mode. If things go badly, your intent might shift further into withdrawal. The sooner you can shift back, the better. The trick is to make yourself aware of the change in your intent, decide to do something about it, and then take the right course of action.

How to shift gears into an affirming intent:

- **Find a way to relax. Breathe deeply. Laugh**. Think of things that make you happy. Allow yourself to enjoy whatever you are doing, however you choose to enjoy it. If necessary, get up and take a break. Jog around the block. In short, change your physical mood and let that work some magic on your psyche. As psychologists say: "Act yourself into a way of feeling."

- **Focus on understanding why you feel threatened**, and ascertain whether it's a legitimate threat or simply your own "stuff" being transferred to another person. If you come to realize it's your own stuff, then that awareness may help you feel more relaxed. If possible, jot down your awareness, refer to it later and discuss with a trusted friend why it happens.

- **Focus on your strengths – what you do well**. If someone else is bugging you, focus on their strengths, too, and say something appreciative about them. And remember that no one has absolute clarity or the gift of perfection. Business teams and organizational groups are filled with a wild assortment of imperfect human beings who need each other's help and support to achieve productive communication and decisions. You're one of them. Relax and join in.

Do you feel that there are situations in which an affirming intent is simply not possible?

- When I'm under attack or being criticized.
- When someone else is being a bully.
- When it's simply not worth the effort.
- When people aren't very friendly.

While there are circumstances where an affirming intent is difficult, it's still the case that the most effective communication occurs when it's present.

The key message is: When the stakes are high, and the outcomes are important, learn the discipline of using affirming intent. It will always work in your favor.

What aspects of communication reflect an affirming intent?

- Asking open-ended questions.
- Showing genuine interest in my views.
- A moderate tone of voice.
- Friendly body language.
- Respect.

Conclusion

In order for all of our different styles to communicate together effectively, we have to lay the groundwork for positive communication. The superglue of the three elements of communication, an affirming intent, establishes mutual respect: It's the foundation of trust. If we do this, we can use more advanced skills of communication. If not, it's back to the same old thing.