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**Say What You Mean: A Mindful
Approach to Nonviolent
Communication**

Made by Blinkist



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Maybe these blinks will inspire you to dig deeper, or maybe they're enough to start you thinking and then on to something new. However you read blinks, we hope they help you become an even brighter you.

What's in it for me? Learn practical skills for more meaningful communication.

If you're like any other human being on this planet, you've probably experienced the power words can have. They can be the difference between giving up and finding new hope at a painful time, or could be the element that makes or breaks a relationship. The words we use and the way we say them are fundamental to the way we connect with the people around us.

But while few things are as common as dialogue, it is surprisingly difficult to get right. Although we're all constantly talking, many of us lack the words we need to express ourselves in an authentic way. All too often, we don't know how to say exactly what we mean – and be heard.

The good news is that finding your voice and speaking your mind are skills that

anyone can learn. In these blinks, you'll discover the ingredients for successful communication, and the simple principles you can use to bring joy to the conversations you have. You'll understand how to feel more at ease bringing up difficult issues, and how to listen to the deep concerns behind others' words.

You'll also find out

- how a camera can help you avoid being judgmental;
- why chasing pleasure and resisting pain are not always the best strategy; and
- what your emotions have in common with a smoke alarm.

In successful communication, we create understanding through awareness.

Have you had the experience of talking to someone who just doesn't seem to hear you? Have you found yourself telling a story to a friend whose attention is focused on his phone, or tried having a conversation with a partner whose eyes are glued to the TV? If so, you'll know that this can be incredibly frustrating, because although you're both speaking the same language, there simply isn't any awareness of you or your words – it's like you're not even there.

Ultimately it means that, in such moments, communication can't and isn't happening.

The key message here is: In successful communication, we create understanding through awareness.

It might seem obvious, but we rarely stop to think about *why* we're communicating at all. The answer? It comes down to one simple word: *understanding*.

Understanding is the purpose of all communication.

In order for understanding to be the ultimate outcome in our communication, however, we need *awareness*. But what does awareness mean when it comes to communication?

Well, the one thing it requires is *presence*. More than just a state of mind, presence means physically being aware of, and sensing, all aspects of yourself through your body. It's being in tune with your mental states and your emotional experiences – just as they express themselves in your body.

Having presence for a moment or two is easy enough for most of us – it's as simple as turning your attention inward

and becoming aware of what you're feeling and experiencing at that moment.

What's more challenging, though, is keeping that awareness going, especially when you're in the middle of a conversation.

There are good reasons for that: For one thing, it takes time and effort to let go of our old communication patterns, which might include things like yelling when we don't feel heard or giving someone the silent treatment. Even when we know these counterproductive methods are ineffective, it can still be quite hard to replace them with something more life-enhancing.

The good news is that presence can be learned – it's just a question of practice and learning a few basic principles.

Leading with presence is the basic principle of effective communication.

Think about the last time you admired the beauty of a sunset, enjoyed a swim in the sea, or shared a moment of intimacy with a close friend. During these wonderful, intense experiences, we feel fully awake – we're completely and wholeheartedly present. It's what makes them so rich.

But the benefits of presence don't stop there. Presence is not limited to those extraordinary moments – it's actually available to us throughout our lives.

Once learned, it can lay the foundations for true connection and enables us to communicate with others successfully.

The key message here is: Leading with presence is the basic principle of effective communication.

So how do we bring presence to our conversations?

Well, to start with, remember that presence is about awareness. It begins with knowing what's happening at the current moment without judging or reacting.

You can use a simple technique to develop your ability to be present, beginning with first reflecting on what you already know about it.

To do that, think about what helps you stay connected and what distracts you. For example, you might notice that you're more aware of the world around you – and of yourself – when you slow down, listen to music you love, and spend time with good friends. On the other hand, factors like being hungry, tired, or stressed tend to make us lose our presence. That's what happens when, for example, you catch yourself dropping things while in a rush or

snapping at people in frustration. Our ability to get things done suffers when we lose presence – and most importantly, so does communication. But once you know the things that prevent you from staying connected, you can spot them in your everyday life and take the necessary actions to correct them.

Most of all, presence means being real and honest with yourself. That doesn't mean simply going along with whatever is happening, or brutally saying everything that's on our minds. It just means acknowledging and accepting the reality of what's happening.

That way, you can more easily identify when you're getting stressed out or annoyed, and be more reflective about it. Although you can't always prevent those emotional states from developing, being aware of them gives you a choice about how to react. And if you're more

thoughtful about your reactions, you'll be able to avoid unnecessary conflicts.

Consciously choosing when to speak or listen is key to meaningful conversation.

A meditation teacher working with a group of prisoners once asked them to add up the time they were all doing there; it came to well over a hundred years. Then he posed this next question: How long did it take you to decide to commit the crime that landed you here? The combined total was less than two minutes. Quite a contrast, right?

Most of our impulses may not be criminal, but that crucial pause between an urge and the resulting action is useful for much more than just avoiding jail time. When it comes to conversation, reflective pauses have the power to make it more engaging and, ultimately, fulfilling.

The key message here is: Consciously choosing when to speak or listen is key to meaningful conversation.

When you approach a conversation with presence, you'll notice that every moment offers the option of speaking or listening. This awareness can make the difference between engaging in a sparkling or tedious back-and-forth with friends or colleagues. Meaningful dialogues require conscious decisions from participants, and knowing when and where to listen or speak in the flow of conversation is called a *choice point*.

So how do you recognize choice points in conversations? Well, with a bit of practice.

The first step is getting to know yourself a bit better by focusing on understanding how conversation works for you. In order to do that, start by picking someone in your life with whom you feel comfortable. This is important because you'll already be more relaxed when talking to that person.

When you're having a conversation with this person, pay attention to when you choose to speak. If you find that you're in the middle of a monologue you didn't intend to get into, try stopping and leaving a bit of space for the other person to jump in. You might also notice that at certain points you'll feel the pressure to say something, while at others you'll feel like holding back. As the conversation goes on, pay special attention to what it feels like to be active about choosing to speak, as opposed to automatically launching into a topic without thinking.

Putting into practice this exploration of your tendencies and patterns will set you on the path to a more authentic form of expression.

The great thing about communication is that there's no right way to do it – it's all about engaging in a way that works for you. Practicing being aware of when to

Speak and listen will help you fill your life with those scintillating talks that make conversing with our fellow humans such a joy.

Recognize your unhelpful conflict styles and don't play the blame game.

Ever lived with someone who wasn't as tidy as you? Imagine spending hours scrubbing the kitchen, only to find a fresh pile of dirty dishes crowding the sink. The frustration you may feel as a result could cause you to wonder out loud why your housemate is such a slob!

Conversely, do you consider your housemate to be a clean freak, responding to his accusation with "Why can't you just relax?"

If you step back for a moment, you'll notice how, no matter which side you're on, your reflection on the conflict will often come down to what the other person's doing wrong. That's because when things don't go our way, we fail to take ownership of our part in the dispute, and often find ourselves blaming others.

The key message here is: Recognize your unhelpful conflict styles and don't play the blame game.

Blaming is what happens when we react without thinking – and it only ends up making the conflict worse. After all, if I want you to change your behavior, pointing out what's wrong with you is unlikely to help. It'll just make you defensive.

Unfortunately, we've all picked up a few unhelpful ways of dealing with conflict. The good news is that we can change these habits by first recognizing and then replacing them for ones that will instead spark more productive conversations.

There are four main unhelpful conflict styles. Let's see if you can relate to any of them.

First, there's *conflict avoidance*. As the name suggests, it's when you try to evade conflict at all costs, whether by

changing the subject every time a problem comes up or simply ignoring it altogether.

Then there's *competitive confrontation*. That's when we forcefully push for what we want, completely ignoring the other person's point of view. Raising your voice, making demands, or even threatening someone can all be part of this.

Third, we have *passivity*. That's the opposite of confrontation. It's when we give up before we've started, agreeing to whatever the other person wants, ignoring our needs and failing to express our opinion.

Finally, there's *passive aggression*. This is an indirect form of confrontation. As the name suggests, it's when a sharp, aggressive commentary is typically buried beneath a seemingly innocent, or passive, retort. Though this style of conflict might resemble avoidance, it's

actually active, but is not open about it.
Washing all the dishes except your
housemate's in order to send a message
would be a great example of this.

Intention is the most powerful element of conversation.

Though conflicts can be a sore point in our communication, that doesn't mean that a difference of opinion is always a bad thing. Sometimes, successfully working through a profound disagreement with a partner or a close friend can actually lead to a deeper sense of intimacy.

It's the differences between us that make life so rich. They bring us together and help us get to know each other better. But how do we make sure that our disagreements bring up new ideas and insights instead of ending up in conflict?

The answer comes down to one word: intention.

The key message here is: Intention is the most powerful element of conversation.

When it comes to communication, what's important is the intention behind what we're saying. If we start with the right kind of intention instead of getting caught up in our habitual patterns of blame, we can create genuine connections with others.

What does this mean, though?

Think about how you approach your experiences. You try to get away from what you don't like and hold on to the nice things, right? It's a very natural way to go about your life. Our mind judges everything that happens as good or bad, resists unpleasant experiences, and tries to make the nicer ones last longer. And when that doesn't work, you often end up getting angry at yourself or others.

But have you stopped to think about how much energy chasing pleasure and avoiding pain takes? Especially when these things are out of our hands – like another person's behavior – trying to

control our experience in this way can quickly get frustrating and exhausting.

Fortunately, there is another way. Instead of judging and controlling our experiences, we can simply aim to understand. And that's exactly what changing our intentions comes down to.

So how does that work? The answer can be summed up in two words: curiosity and care.

Let's address *curiosity*. This feeling is usually sparked by an interest in learning and recognizing what we don't yet know about something. Whether you're in a conversation or reading an email, you can address your curiosity about anything raised by asking yourself a couple of questions: "What matters to me or the other person in this situation?" and "What can I learn from this?"

This approach can trigger a subtle shift from immediately jumping to conclusions to simply wanting to know more. Once you do that, you'll find the quality of your communication changes. After all, everyone responds better to curiosity than to accusations.

Now for the other word: *care*. This can be summed up as goodwill and a willingness to pay attention. It means you start by assuming that the other person has something valuable to contribute. As soon as you see him as a valuable human with his own needs that deserve to be taken into account, you make a commitment to respecting that.

Listening is how we maintain connection in a conversation.

You're not listening to me!

Ever heard – or said – those words in the middle of a heated argument?

If you're like most people, the answer is probably yes. We've all been in those frustrating discussions in which our message is just not getting through. Both sides pile reason on top of reason, statement on top of statement, but no one seems to understand – or even acknowledge – the other's point of view. We might as well be speaking different languages.

When that happens, it's a clear sign that somewhere along the way the connection has been lost.

The key message here is: Listening is how we maintain connection in a

conversation.

When someone tells us we're not listening, it usually means that the other person doesn't feel heard – or understood. Often, it's a call for empathy.

So just how do you make the other feel heard?

Well, one simple tool you can use is *reflection*. It's a way of checking in to confirm that what you're hearing is what the other person intended to say. And to do that, you either ask a question or restate what she said in your own words. Doing that makes space for your counterpart to tell you whether that's what was meant.

Not only does this communication tool help to get the intended message across, it also establishes a feeling of empathy, which can make the difference between a productive discussion and a nasty fight.

By way of an example, let's see how reflection can be used effectively. Take a common fight that a couple might get into. One person might say, exasperated, "I'm so sick of being the only one who ever does anything around here!" If that's directed at you, you might feel tempted to leap to your own defense immediately with something like, "What about those five loads of laundry I did last week?!" Rather than going down that route, try to acknowledge how your partner is feeling by reflecting the emotions behind the statement. You could do so by saying something like, "Wow, you're really fed up, aren't you?" The modification instantly sets your argument down the path to a potentially more constructive conversation about this or similar tensions in your relationship.

Reflecting in this way won't always feel natural, and that's fine. It's just a tool. The crucial thing is the sincerity of your

intention, because when people feel heard, they're also more likely to listen. That's how connections stay alive.

Recognizing our needs is at the heart of successful communication.

Imagine what it would be like if whatever someone said or did, you could always hear the deep inner concerns behind his words and actions. Imagine that you always intuitively knew what mattered to you in any situation.

This kind of harmony with yourself and with others doesn't have to remain a fantasy. It is possible in your everyday life, and what it comes down to is recognizing your values and needs, and those of others.

Our needs are the basic values that drive all our actions. They are what matters most to us, and the reason why we want what we want. The better we understand our own needs, the more open we are to hearing others. And the better we understand others' needs, the more

opportunity we have to create true connections.

The key message here is: Recognizing our needs is at the heart of successful communication.

Human needs range from the basics like food and shelter to more abstract ones such as creativity and fulfillment. Our needs also include connections like relationships with family or with a community, and feelings like respect and trust. But whether simple or complex, the fact is all our needs matter.

What shows up in our everyday interactions, however, is usually not the needs themselves, but the *strategies* we've developed for meeting them. A strategy is just a specific way of meeting a need, and is often expressed as something that you want, especially from another person. For example, if I say that *I need you to listen to me right now*, that's a strategy. The need behind it is

probably for understanding. Or if I complain about you showing up late every time we meet, this might be about a need for respect.

Simply put, we get into conflicts because of how we express the needs we're trying to meet. So the key to avoiding conflict is to recognize the needs behind the strategies.

Let's say you want to go on a trip, and you suggest doing so with your partner *and* a group of friends. Though this seems like a lovely idea, your partner might actually prefer a romantic break with just the two of you. In this instance, if you both remain focused only on what each of you wants, you may end up having a massive fight about the trip, and ultimately staying home.

If you take a step back and consider what's behind the strategies in this example, though, you might find that you're both trying to meet the same

need for connection and belonging, albeit in different ways. Once you see what's at stake for each of you – why you want what you want – you can get out of the competitive win/lose mode and work together toward a mutually-fulfilling solution.

Emotions are signals that alert us to our needs.

What would you do if a smoke alarm in your home suddenly went off right now? Would you keep doing what you were doing, hoping that it would somehow go away by itself, or would you start looking around to see if there were an actual fire happening somewhere?

While we all understand the call to action that unmistakable beeping sound sends, the signals coming from within our minds and bodies can be much harder to decipher.

These signals are our emotions, and every single one of them is trying to tell us something. Just like we know what to do when we hear the alarm, we need to learn to decode the messages our emotions are sending.

The key message here is: Emotions are signals that alert us to our needs.

In a lot of cultures, most people are socialized to believe that emotions are irrational, harmful, or scary, and tend to be associated with things like weakness or manipulation. Consequently, very often, as we grow up, we're trained to suppress and ignore what we feel. For example, how many times did you hear that "boys don't cry" or "good girls don't get angry"? Certainly at least once.

But emotions are there for a reason. In fact, they are the main way our body and our mind send us messages about our needs. When our needs are met, we feel good. When they're not, unpleasant emotions like anger or sadness take over. When we refuse to pay attention to them, they can start to harm rather than enhance our lives.

For example, we can get so overwhelmed by an emotion like anger that we get

impulsive and lash out, damaging our relationships in the process.

Or, at the other extreme, we can become so afraid of being overwhelmed that we bottle things up. Unacknowledged emotions like these can also be harmful and impair our communications with others. They'll still show up in our body language, our tone of voice, the expressions on our faces, and the words that we choose. All of these expressions can inform people about how we're really feeling. A fake smile or quietly seething resentment will not just be noticed – they're likely to help turn others against us.

The skill of managing your emotions in a thoughtful way comes down to *emotional agility*. This involves being able to name what you're feeling, finding ways to experience that feeling in a balanced way, and expressing it openly, without judgment or blame.

The more aware of your emotions you become, the more conscious you can be about how you choose to participate in conversations.

Raising a difficult issue successfully involves making an observation and avoiding judgment.

Remember what was shared regarding the blame game? Well, in summary, blame thrives on judgments and interpretations. Your friend never does what he says, your colleague is disorganized, your partner is too messy, and so on. The ultimate result is that when the other person doesn't agree with your judgment, they're going to challenge it. And before you know it, you're in the middle of a screaming match.

But how do we say what we mean in a way that allows us to stay true to ourselves without hurting the other person or starting a fight?

The answer comes down to how we begin the conversation, and the trick is to start with the facts.

The key message here is: Raising a difficult issue successfully involves making an observation and avoiding judgment.

We can all agree that when it comes to constructive communication, simply listening to the other person can get you quite far. Often, however, we have things we need to say too. Moreover, we might sometimes also need to raise issues that are difficult for others to hear. That's why it's important to find common ground from the start.

In order to do that, you can begin with an *observation* – a neutral, concrete description of the situation that's separate from your judgment of it.

It can be hard to separate observations from our subjective interpretations, though. So one quick test you can use is to ask yourself a simple question: "If this situation were filmed, what would the camera capture?" Let's say you're

worried and angry because your partner ignored you last night when she got home from work. Can “ignoring” be caught on film? Or is one person simply walking past another, and “ignoring” is the interpretation you’re adding to this scene?

Another good benchmark is to think about whether what you’re about to say is likely to cause defensiveness. After all, you’re trying to connect with another person, not alienate him. How can you say what you have to say in the most neutral way possible? “When you ignored me...” is likely to be a bit provocative. A more neutral way to approach it is simply to begin by stating a fact: “When I saw you come in and walk past me...”

When you start turning your judgments into observations, you’ll see that there’s always more than one possible interpretation in any given situation. That

in itself can often be enough to make us more open to really hearing what others have to say.

Asking for something is about finding a way to meet a need.

Do you have trouble asking for help even when you really need it? If so, you're not alone. For many of us, it can feel easier to carry a heavy load alone than to face the fear and discomfort of reaching out. And that's understandable. We don't want to be a burden on other people – we want to leave them free to say no.

It's not that our intentions are bad – thinking about others' needs is great. But in the process, we often neglect our own.

The key message here is: Asking for something is about finding a way to meet a need.

The reason it can feel so difficult to make a request is that when we ask for something, we acknowledge our dependence on other people. It can

make us feel very vulnerable. That's because it opens up the possibility of rejection and disappointment.

But the impulse to give and receive is actually one of our most natural. Think about the last time you helped a friend – not because you felt you had to, but simply because you wanted to – or when someone did a small act of kindness for you, like holding the door. Felt good, right?

If we learn to ask for what we need, all our needs can be about experiencing this joy of giving and receiving.

Often, when our needs are not met, the reason is simple: it's because no one realizes that we want something. A request is a tool that lets another person know your need and the specific action you'd like them to take to meet it. Remember when we talked about strategies? Requests are a great strategy for meeting a need.

So how do you ask for something you need?

The answer comes down to clarity. The clearer you are about what you want and why, the easier it is to find a way to make it happen.

When it comes to clarity, it helps if the requests you make have the following three qualities. First, a request should be *positive*. In other words, say what you do want, not what you don't. Second, it should be *specific*. That means that you need to ask for something concrete and doable. And finally, be *flexible*. Make it more of a suggestion, open to other possibilities – not an ultimatum.

Dialogue will flow if you're attentive to its parts.

Ever danced the night away? Then you know what a great conversation can feel like. Just like in a dance, the steps can take a while to learn, but when you're effortlessly spinning away arm in arm with a partner, it feels magical.

So far, you've learned a lot about the steps, but now let's talk about putting them together.

The key message here is: Dialogue will flow if you're attentive to its parts.

Just like dancing, conversation has its own rhythms of give-and-take. In fact, there are three main parts to a successful conversation. We can express ourselves, listen intently, or simply rest and take in everything that's taken place.

Those are the basic moves of the dance. And here are some principles you can apply to help them happen as gracefully as possible.

To begin with, there's *framing*. It's about how you set things up. The important thing is to start with something you have in common. That way, you create a feeling of working together instead of trying to compete.

Say you want to talk about a hurtful remark your partner made. Instead of ambushing her with the most painful bit – “I felt so hurt when you called me an egoist!” – start with some shared ground. For example, you might approach it by asking her to discuss yesterday's conversation and how you can both understand each other's needs better.

With your dialogue off to a good start, it's a good idea to keep an eye on how it's going. That's where *tracking* comes

in. It involves staying aware of both the process and the content of your conversation.

To do that, first, pay attention to the kind of conversation you're having. Is it your relationship that's at stake in the discussion, or are you just trying to solve a logistical problem? When your partner called you an egoist, it might have been about you not coming to her work party. But what's important to understand is whether it's simply a matter of clashing schedules or if there's a deeper relational issue behind it, like her need for support.

Another thing to track is who's the *center of attention* at a given moment. In other words, who has the floor, and how does it move from person to person? The more aware you are of those shifts, the more you can do to make sure that everyone has a chance to say what they need.

And that's when the conversation flows.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Communication can be hard, but luckily it's a skill that anyone can learn. It comes down to cultivating presence, consciously choosing when to speak, learning how to listen deeply, and paying attention to our needs and emotions. When we have the sincere intention to connect, we can practice the steps that lead to truly fulfilling and productive conversations.

Actionable advice:

Take a pause

Next time you find yourself getting overwhelmed in the middle of a conversation, find a skillful way to pause. Make clear your wish to stay connected with the other person, and share that you need a break. For example, you

could say something like, “I just need a moment to gather my thoughts.” In this way, both of you can have some time to reflect and regain empathy for each other, instead of saying something hurtful on the spur of the moment.

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What to read next: *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall B. Rosenberg

Now that you understand the practices that make up successful communication, you might be wondering where they came from. Nonviolent communication is at the heart of great and productive conversations. And the best way to learn more about it is directly from the person

who first put the ideas behind it together.

In *Nonviolent Communication*, Marshall B. Rosenberg explains the principles that help us avoid hurting others when we communicate and lead to a life of collaboration and compassion in the way that we relate to people and use words. So if you're ready to delve even deeper into what makes communication meaningful, check out our blinks to this classic read.

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