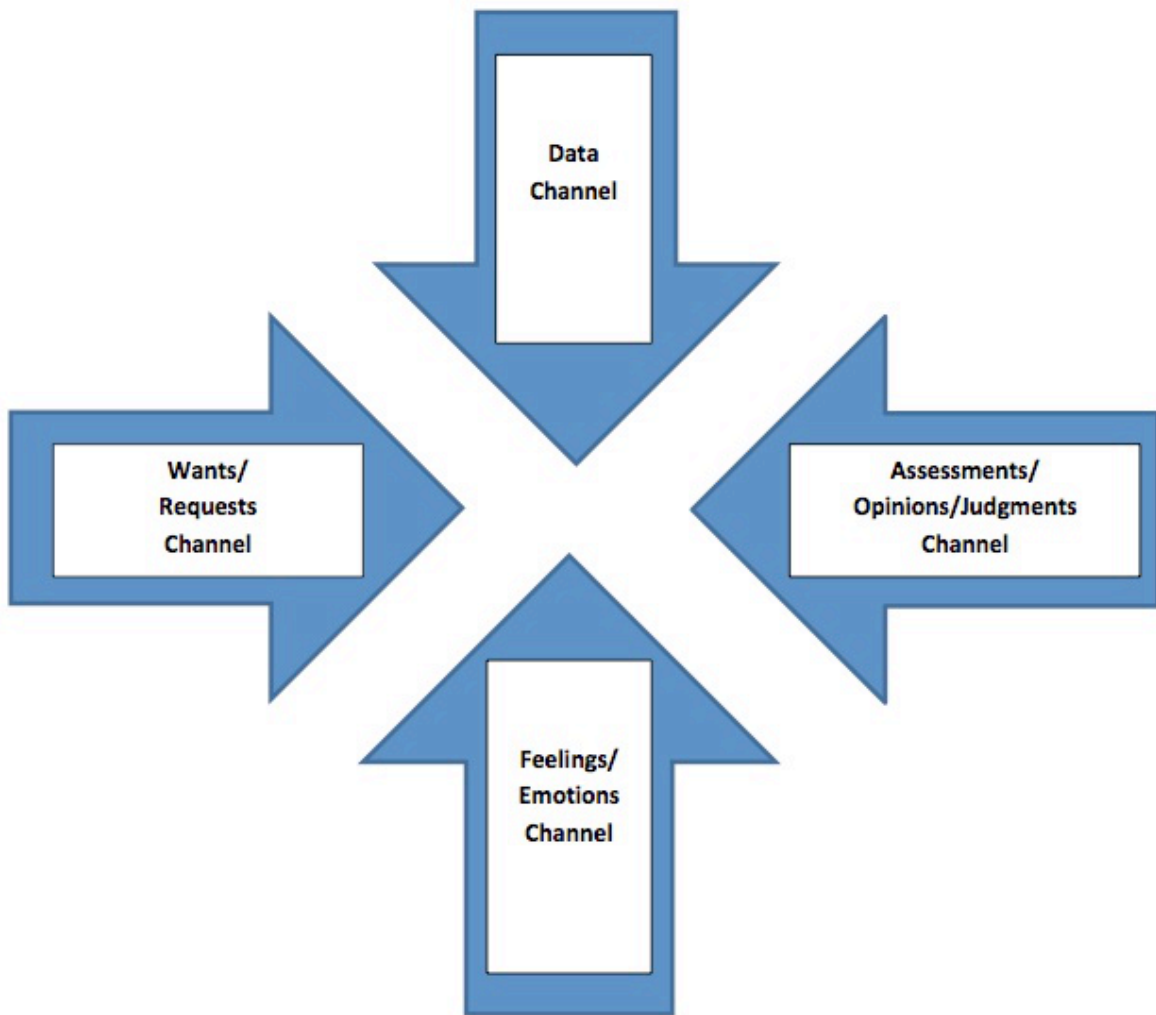


Promoting Psychological Flexibility Through Communications Skills Training

By Charles Laurel, MS, LCMHC

Ten years ago, I was introduced to a communication skills set called Clean Talk (originally developed by Alyce Barry and Cliff Barry). I started working with the skills in my personal life and quickly noticed the difference that it made, not only in the quality of my relationships, but also in how it seemed to affect my thinking process. I found it easier to listen to people, even when I disagreed with them; I was able to catch myself jumping to conclusions and choosing to refrain from verbalizing my half-formed, emotionally-fueled opinions; I was speaking up more clearly, directly, and skillfully about what was important to me and what I wanted. A few years later I learned about ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) and how ACT promotes psychological flexibility on the basis a thoroughly researched theory of language as learned behavior (Relational Frame Theory, RFT). Since then, in my work as a therapist and as an educator, I have been using Clean Talk as an ACT intervention, as yet another tool for promoting psychological flexibility. And, I have found that ACT enhances the effectiveness of Clean Talk in ways that I will outline in this article. I will focus on the intersection between ACT and Clean Talk, but not try to explain either in full; much can be found on either topic from other, more thorough sources. I'll start with a simple hand-out description of Clean Talk that I use in teaching one-hour introductory workshops. Feel free to use it and modify it in your work. Then I'll look at Clean Talk through lenses of ACT's six processes of psychological flexibility.

People familiar with Non-Violent Communication (NVC) will likely find both commonalities and differences in these skill sets. I am sure that ACT and NVC can also work together complementarily. I would be interested to hear whether what I explore here in this article has resonance for people working with NVC.



Clean Talk is a skill set for effective communication originally developed by Alyce Barry and Cliff Barry. Consciously choosing what channel you are communicating on greatly improves the odds of effective communication. Discerning what channel the other person is communicating on doubles the chances of reaching understanding—even if the other person isn't communicating skillfully.

Learn more at:

https://www.zoomcollaborate.com/uploads/documents/CleanTalk_4_Ways.pdf

The Four Channels:

(Elaborating on the work of Susan DeGenring)

DATA: What you see and hear that others can also see and hear. No opinions, interpretations, or judgments.

ASSESSMENTS/JUDGMENTS: What you think is going on. Your opinions about the situation, yourself, and the other person.

FEELINGS/EMOTIONS: stated as core emotions—joy, sadness, anger, shame/guilt, fear (or glad, sad, mad, bad, afraid).

WANTS/REQUESTS: Say what you want in concrete, measurable terms. Being willing to hear “no” for an answer is the difference between a request and a demand. Saying what you want in this way also helps identify your values. Knowing what your values are helps guide decisions. For example if you want what another person is unwilling or unable to provide.

Where to start? Safest bet is to start with Data and check with the other person to see if their Data matches. **Where not to start?** It’s risky to start with Assessments—that’s often a good way to start an argument, one opinion verses another. Also risky to start with Feelings—leading with, “I’m mad,” for example, is likely to put the other on defensive. **What if the other person starts on the Assessments channel?** Your choice. You might ask for data (don’t call it that though). Or you might try listening, without arguing or agreeing, just letting them know you are listening, then seeing if they can change channels by asking for Data or Wants. Ask if they are willing to hear your side. If not, ask if there’s another time to talk. **How do I express anger in Clean Talk?** First be willing to feel anger on the inside. (If your aim in the moment is to get relief from anger, you can abandon Clean Talk, and say whatever you want). Or, you might wait for the anger wave (what you feel on the inside) to pass and then come back to Clean Talk. Try using the Wants channel instead of the Feelings Channel. **What if the other person is stuck in the Feelings and Assessments channels and I’ve already tried listening without arguing?** Avoid the urge to join them there. Come back later. **Should I just let it slide?** Maybe. Sometimes arguments are more about wanting to be right than about working things out. But! If what you want is important, don’t let it slide—that’s a formula for resentment. Give it your best shot using your skills. **I’ve tried making requests; can I make demands too?** Yes. Sometimes demands are appropriate. “Don’t take my money without asking,” for example. In many situations, however, people respond better to requests than demands—especially if you ask what they want first.

From an ACT perspective, let's explore how practicing Clean Talk can enhance all six processes of ACT's psychological flexibility model (and vice-versa).

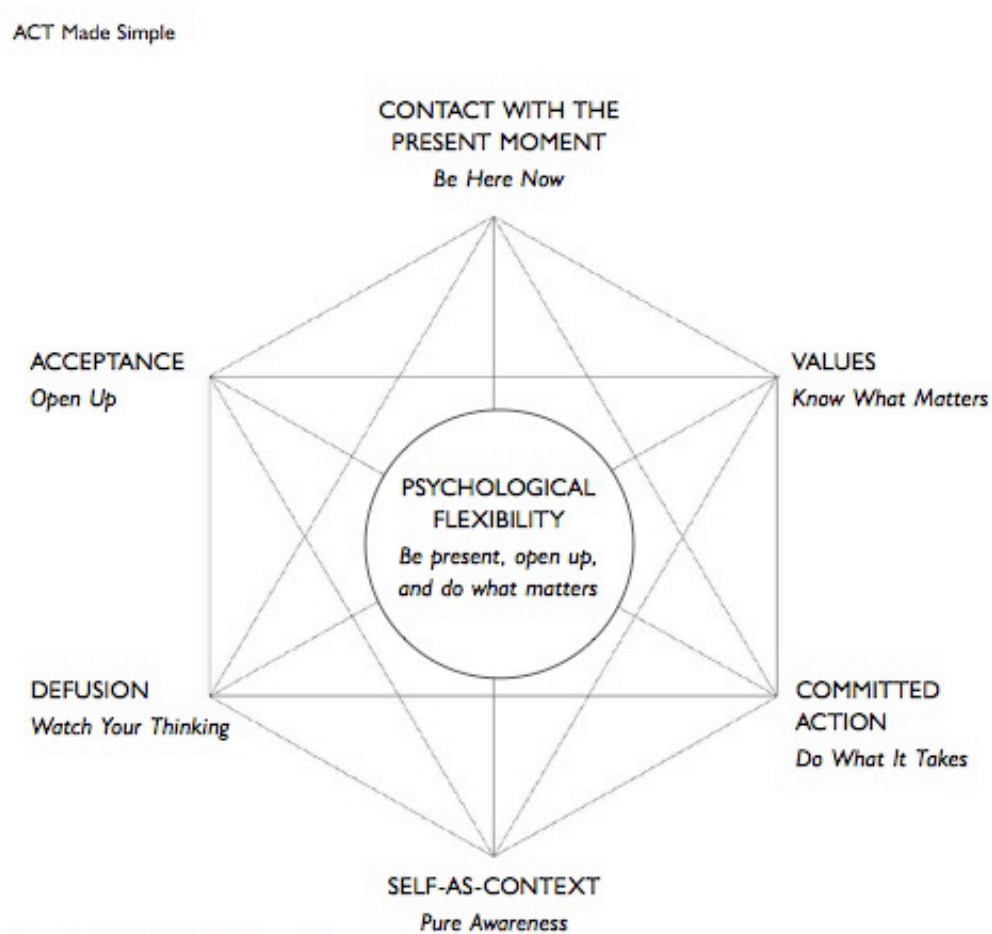


Figure 1.1 The ACT Hexaflex

Paying attention to what channel of communication you are on, and what channel the other person is on, is a present moment endeavor, a mindfulness practice so-to-speak. Exercising attention in this way builds capacity to be present even under duress. Having the flexibility to shift awareness back and forth from one's own interior process to the awareness of the other person's presence also increases the odds of effective communication.

Discriminating ‘data’ from ‘assessments’ can function as a defusion practice. Noticing the difference between sensory cues and private (inner) verbal experience brings attention to the *process* of thinking, engaging self-as-context, possibly undermining over-identification with the *contents* of thoughts, in other words, relating to thoughts as an experience you are having without over-investing in the Truth of thoughts. In RFT terms, discriminating ‘data’ from ‘assessments’ can increase flexible context sensitivity—we can experience *both* our sensory experience and our interior verbal experience, flexibly attending to what is useful in the moment. This is particularly helpful when emotions are running high, when our minds tend to produce more rigid, definitive assessment thoughts (blaming thoughts for example). From the ACT side, experience with defusion processes, more generally, makes the data/assessments discrimination process easier to access in times of need.

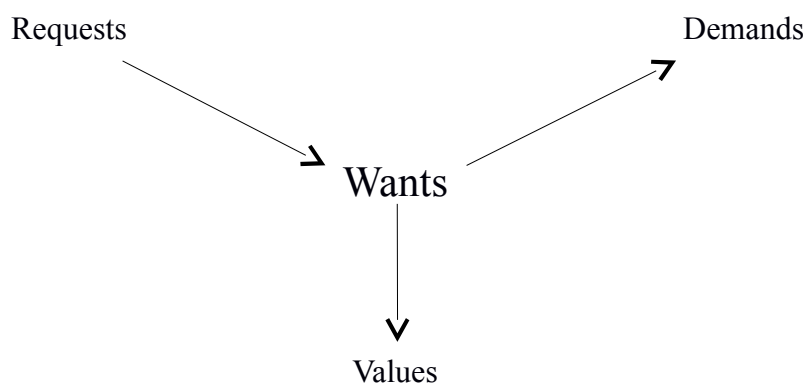
Acceptance of emotional experience is facilitated in Clean Talk. First, by bringing attention to basic feelings and naming them as sadness, anger, joy, fear, guilt/shame, a person comes more in contact with the emotions experienced, possibly undermining avoidance processes that might be in play. Secondly, by differentiating emotions from thoughts (‘feelings’ from ‘assessments’) a person may defuse, to some extent, from thought processes that might be reinforcing emotional reactivity. Clean Talk encourages a fairly ruthless sorting of thoughts from feelings; even a statement like, “I feel hurt,” would likely be sorted into, “You did (state the data) in order to hurt me, in my opinion, and I feel angry (or afraid, or sad, etc.)” Taking time in a person’s inner dialog with this sorting activity can engage psychological flexibility processes of acceptance and defusion, as mentioned above, as well as mindful present and self-as-context by moving toward a perspective that thoughts and feelings are what a person has rather than what a

person is. The effectiveness of Clean Talk can be augmented, from a self-as-context perspective, by practicing statements like, “I’m noticing blaming thoughts and angry feelings.”

Reactive behaviors typically function to alter a person’s immediate emotional experience, so it follows that willingness to feel emotions goes hand-in-hand with choosing valued behaviors over reactive behaviors. Clean Talk encourages values-oriented communication behaviors by linking feelings with ‘wants.’ Skillfully shifting from the assessment and feelings channels to the wants channel may entail internal verbal inquiries such as, “My feeling of _____ tells me I really care about _____.” Making requests of the other person may ensue-- asking for what you want in specifics, in ‘data’ terms as we might say in Clean Talk.

Since learning ACT, I have brought values clarification into communication skills work to an extent that I haven’t experienced with other Clean Talk facilitators. I have expanded the wants channel to include values. Values are freely chosen abstract qualities of behavior and attitude that are not perfectible but always actionable. Values can function to give direction to patterns of behavior that yield more meaning and fulfillment *over time* than shorter term satisfactions of avoiding unpleasantness and grabbing immediate gratification. In communication for example, it is natural to want relief from an unpleasant interaction, and letting that perfectly crafted stinging comment slip off the end of the tongue can effectively both cut the experience short, pushing the other person away, and provide some satisfaction, “Putting them in their place,” for example. But, for how long does that satisfaction typically last? Did I get any closer to what I really wanted by doing that? Did I move closer to my values, being who I really want to be, or further away?

Here is how I diagram it out, saying, “‘Wants’ goes in two directions: Outwardly—I can make requests or demands for what I want from others; and inwardly—what I want can give me a clue about what my values are and I can learn more about what kind of person I want to be.



This diagramming fits nicely with DeGenring’s four arrows depiction of Clean Talk. The upper left corner of the four arrows diagram positions requests and demands in proximity to the data channel, a nice visual reference for teaching skills of phrasing requests and demands in specific, measurable, do-able terms. This skill also trains psychological flexibility in several ways: *Mindful present*—asking for what you want now, without being overly influenced by past events and hurts. *Perspective taking (self-as-context)*—asking for what you want informed by what the other person is actually able to do (putting yourself in their shoes). *Defusion*—choosing whether to make a demand or a request is an active engagement with the use of language. Being aware of the process of choosing words can increase flexibility in how you relate to your verbal experience. *Acceptance*—discerning what is within your control and what is not is encouraged in Clean Talk when making requests or demands. Letting pass the reactive urges to make ineffective or inapplicable demands both increases the likelihood of effective communication, and increases capacity to be present with uncomfortable feelings.

The lower left corner of DeGenring's diagram, the intersection between the wants and feelings channels, is where I engage people with values clarification. For example, working with the statement, "I want to be appreciated," we can craft requests such as, "Please tell me when you notice me doing things that you appreciate." That is a typical, and valuable, Clean Talk move. From an ACT perspective we can also take the opportunity to connect with the values that are emerging in the conversation. A person who wants appreciation likely values appreciation. If a person affirms, "Yes, that is a value of mine," contact with that value might influence their behavior, in communication and otherwise, by being appreciative toward others, for example. If a person is not clear about their values, emotions might shed some light. We can validate a person's feelings and inquire, "Is this feeling familiar to you from other times? For how long has this feeling been showing up? What if this feeling is like a messenger that keeps showing up, letting you know that something is important or you wouldn't be feeling this way? Maybe like a messenger bird that lights on your shoulder and says... something. What would it say to you about what's important, that your feeling means something about who you are, who you want to be?"

In conclusion, practicing communication skills, like Clean Talk, can facilitate the processes of increasing psychological flexibility targeted in ACT. And reciprocally, consciously bringing ACT perspectives into teaching communication skills can enhance the effectiveness of communication; communication undertaken as committed action can reinforce values-oriented action more generally.