COIN Communications Framework

There is an old saying that, "the natural result of communication is misunderstanding"[1]. We come by this humbling truth naturally: it's very common to think that others understand what we're saying, even if we share only a small piece of our full experience or perspective.

Sometimes, speaking in this shorthand style of communication works. But often, especially when we're upset, uncomfortable, and communicating across difference, we run into trouble. And the truth is that unless we're talking to ourselves, we are always communicating across different identities, lived experiences, and interpretations.

Increasing our communication skills is also essential as we work to grow our ability to let others know when their biases may have impacted us.

A simple communications framework that can be used to interrupt bias, give basic feedback, and create a better chance that the intent of our communications is clear is called COIN.

C **Connect + Give Context** *What was the event? What happened? How are your lived experience, values, and needs at play in the event?*	
O **Observations + Opinions** *What are your thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, & observations about the event? (be as specific as possible)*	
I **Impact on self/others/situation** *What impact has the event had on you? Identify feelings, info gaps, concerns. What is your contribution, if any?*	
N **Next Steps** *What are your desired results? Explore options, make suggestions, identify specific requests, come to agreements.*	

[1]Attributed to Larry Wilson

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When using COIN be:

- **SPECIFIC** about what prompted the feedback (observed data - what happened, when, and where)
- **CLEAR** about the impact of the event (behavior, event, language, conversation)
- **EXPLICIT** about the results you'd like from the feedback (everyone will know if the results are achieved)
- Ensure that the results you're asking for are **ACHIEVABLE/FEASIBLE**

Examples of feedback using COIN:

C **Connect + Give Context** *What was the event? What happened? How are your lived experience, values, and needs at play in the event?*	Thank you for agreeing to sit down with me María. I'd like to talk about a challenge I'm having delegating the Sweetwater campaign leadership to you. I'm finding that I'm holding back from fully empowering you to lead on it, and I want to change that dynamic because I trust your leadership, and so does the team. I'm a little nervous because I'm not as skilled in this type of conversation and I really want it to be productive. It might help if I first share some of my observations so you know what I am talking about, and then get your perspective. And then I hope we can come up with some ideas on how to move this forward. It might be good to take 3 minutes now and we can talk more later if we need to – how does that sound?
O **Observations + Opinions** *What are your thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, & observations about the event? (be as specific as possible)*	So, more specifically, it appeared clear to me that in the last two projects we worked on that we were banging our heads together specifically when we learned that the coalition leadership had shifted, and when the deadline for our submission got delayed. In the team meeting, you focused most of the team's time and energy on your frustration around the changed leadership and deadline instead of creating a plan to deal with the new circumstances.
I **Impact on self/others/situation** *What impact has the event had on you? Identify feelings, info gaps, concerns. What is your contribution, if any?*	I found that frustrating and concerning because I know we're both very committed to succeeding in this campaign and by focusing on things we cannot change, we lose ground. I know that by focusing on things that we cannot change, I felt deflated and unable to move into action, and my sense is that the team shared that experience. I understand needing to vent, but as team lead, your play a critical role in providing confidence and a path forward for the team.. In hindsight I wish I had raised this right away so I apologize for sitting on this.
N **Next Steps** *What are your desired results? Explore options, make suggestions, identify specific requests, come to agreements.*	I'd like to talk about what we can do going forward to ensure that we're on the page and provide clear leadership to our team. Would you be willing to have a conversation about strategies to deal with the new leadership and deadline, and then to take the lead on supporting the team to focus on those? I'd like to talk through what might be holding you back from moving into this next phase of our work and how I can support you to lead from a place of strength and conviction. I want to empower you to fully lead this campaign, and to do that I need to see that you are focused on results and impact, providing the team with clear goals and a plan to achieve them.

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By applying the COIN framework to our communication, we create less opportunity for misunderstanding because we're not leaving others to guess what we think happened, how we feel, or what we want.

By slowing down and communicating more clearly and comprehensively, we end up "speeding up" the communication process by reducing misunderstanding. Not only do we have the opportunity to use the COIN framework ourselves, but when we find that we are unclear about what someone else is communicating and that we may be starting to fill in the blanks, we can inquire about their COIN before starting to make up our own story.

COIN is not just for interpersonal situations – it's a great practice to use whenever providing more context might add value. For example, in a strategy session instead of just saying, "I think we should do X," we could add context, observations, intent and impact, and needs (think outcomes) to deepen other's understanding of WHY we're proposing X.

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