



2024

AIAC COHORT PRESENTS

A Communication Toolkit: Carceral Matters

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Communication Toolkit

Incarceration can be a sensitive topic to discuss. Remember, if you approach the discussion as a "battle to win," you are likely to lose. Moreover, you may miss the opportunity to cultivate empathy and build rapport. In this AIAC 2024 Toolkit, we provide tips for enhancing communication when discussing carceral matters, along with practice scenarios for role-play. These tools are cross-disciplinary, as the proposed strategies apply to situations ranging from family discussions to workplace conversations and even interactions with prison officials. Basic communication strategies are universal.



Remember: Emotions are always present during a discussion. Focus on the goals and facts, and manage emotions by choosing the right words.

Effective communication begins with managing emotions. Otherwise, emotions can divert attention from important matters, cause irreparable harm, exploit you or your family, and escalate situations. However, when clear communication is present, it can build rapport and enhance negotiations, leading to desired outcomes.

Quick Tips:

Exclusive & Combative Word Triggers: never, always, only, everyone, every day, forever, no one, you are the only one, you always, you never, they never, they always, they only.

Inclusive Words:

sometimes, lately, mostly, maybe, some, a few times. These words are inclusive and are not exaggerated or "loaded."

1

Legitimacy: Use facts that are indisputable, fair, and persuasive.

2

Strive for the best that you can do for now, rather than walk away with nothing. Create Plan A, Plan B, & Plan C.

3

Articulate clear "asks" and/or goals. Unclear goals are unworkable and unrealistic for others to follow.

Managing Emotions

The amount of emotional energy exerted during a conversation conveys the level of severity, importance, and even emotional investment. Our "emotional radar" is particularly adept at detecting negative emotions, as evidenced by our responses to abrasive tones and reactions to specific language. Building rapport involves refraining from using statements that imply demands and threats, which can trigger negative emotions.

Self-awareness is the key to managing emotions during important conversations. Our emotions are linked to the body-brain response. For instance, when embarrassed, we may feel warm, experience flushed cheeks, sweaty palms, an increased heartbeat, and a general "icky" feeling.

Emotions also affect the brain's executive planning and negotiation center. It's no wonder that when we are flustered or angered, we often lose the perfect "come-back" or response during a heated or stressful debate. The brain's resources needed for quick thinking and long-term planning are redirected to automatic safety and defense responses. *Adverse emotions trigger fight, flight, or freeze reactions.* As a result, the brain's ability to read the room, employ ideal emotional regulation, and understand long-term consequences is temporarily put on hold. Deep thinking is paused until the perceived danger has passed. Even remembering key facts can be challenging. Instead, self-protection mode and efforts for self-preservation take priority. *It may take 30 minutes or longer for the body's metabolism to return to a normal state. Hence, the term "cooling off" has real meaning.*

Consider the opposite state: When you feel safe and appreciated, you can think more clearly and creatively; critical thinking is optimized. Your recall may be elevated, ideas may flow quickly, and your body's functioning and heart rate are normalized.

So, what is the magic answer? High-stakes discussions require a focus on core concerns [goals] and building understanding through rapport to reach desired outcomes. Once you understand how to manage five core feelings, you can use them to advance the discussion and negotiations. The task is to prioritize goals and direct energy toward managing the emotions related to the issue. Fisher and Shapiro (2006) indicated that these five core emotions are a person's interpretation of: appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and roles (Fisher & Shapiro, 2006, chapter 2).

Evaluate: During the discussion, are you feeling unappreciated? Is your affiliation being exploited? Are you feeling disempowered? Is your status underestimated or disrespected? When feelings associated with appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and roles dominate your core focus, emotions can become derailed. The key is to guide each of these emotions toward self-appraisal. For example, use self-talk to reframe feelings of unappreciation into self-appreciation. Remind yourself that you are a quick learner, a loyal partner, or a person willing to advocate for the people you love. Acknowledge your affiliation as a friend, loved one, relative, or co-worker, and recognize your dedication and commitment. This method takes practice but helps normalize your emotions related to self-worth and interrupts the flood of emotions linked to undervaluing your status. Uplift your autonomy by affirming your ability to accept or disagree with any decision aligned with your goals. You hold the power to choose how you receive answers or decisions. Finally, remind yourself of your positive qualities. Your status is more than just a conversation; you excel in many other contexts outside the discussion—as a parent, friend, leader, advocate, student, relative, subject matter expert, etc.

Finally, remember to "breathe." Inhale slowly and exhale twice as long. This method reduces physical and psychological stress.

References

Fisher, R., & Shapiro, D. (2006). *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*. Penguin Books.



CONFIDENT *Conversations*

* 1

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01. SET A GOAL

Have an end goal in mind. Ideally, both the sender and receiver of communication should have goals in mind. One goal might be to be heard, while another could be to be acknowledged.

02. LINK IT TOGETHER

Linking words suggest "possibilities" while creating curiosity. Examples include: and, may I suggest, consider, maybe, I wonder...

03. SOFTEN LINKS

Linking phrases and words lower the temperature while gently encouraging listening. Examples include: "If I may, I'd like to share..." "Perhaps we might..." "Is it possible to..."

04. CLEAR MESSAGE

Make your main point clear. Don't leave anyone guessing. Examples include: "I am here today because I need to better understand all available options." "I need to know what day to return."

05. LEAVE THE "BUT" OUT OF THE CONVERSATION

The word "**but**" tends to diminish everything that was said up to that point. Use "**and**" instead. For example: "I value your idea...and mine is slightly different." "And" validates, while "but" invalidates.

06. LEAD WITH CONFIDENCE

Know your goals, position, and rehearse your discussion points. It'll boost your confidence. For example: "I would like to discuss my husband's situation. At the end, we can discuss viable alternatives moving forward."

07. OMIT "YOU NEED"

Authoritarian styled messaging violates rapport. "You need to provide these people with more phone options" versus "Perhaps offering more phone time might reduce anxiety and aggression in the facility."

08. NEGOTIATE

"I see an option that looks viable for all parties and this one looks good." "Let's give this option a try." "What might it take to implement this option?"

09. CONTAINMENT

Set boundaries to stay on track. Remember the purpose, maintain awareness, listen closely, provide safety and empathy. "Let's see where we are on the agenda."

10. STAY CALM

Nerves and frustration are normal. Take deep breaths and stay focused. "Let's take a 5 minute break to get some air and we can return to the conversation."

11. MAINTAIN SAFETY

Safety enables all participants to have a voice, to be respected, and valued. There will be a difference of opinions. However, using above tools can help. If needed, pause and resume later.

12. SUM IT UP

End with a quick summary and thank your communication partner for their time, even if your desired outcome remains vague. Leave the door open for followup discussions.

YOU CAN BUILD
Rapport!

13. GRACEFUL INTERRUPTIONS

"Excuse me." "I am sorry to break your chain of thought..." "I'd like to get us back to the outline/goals."





CONFIDENT

Conversations

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14 AVOID SHOULD

"You should have listened to me!"
This statement sets off a fire-storm. Instead, consider: "Perhaps we can talk," "Maybe reflecting upon the situation might help."

15 DON'T SOLVE FOR "X"

Remember not to solve for an unknown variable (x). You do not possess other's history and intimate details. Only give advice when asked. Remember that sometimes listening is all that is required.

16 YOU VERSUS "I"

Express your feelings using "I" rather than externalizing the blame and/or ownership, using "You" or "They."

17 VALIDATE

Acknowledge people's feelings before you try to help them regulate their emotions. "I can see that you are frustrated with me." "It looks like I dissappointed you."

18 WHEN TEMPERATURE RISES - TAKE A BREAK

When the conversation escalates - even during a meeting, take a break and establish time for a follow-up. Even if you say, "Give me a minute, I need to get some air." This enables the body to regulate and reset. Highly charged discussion may require more time.

19 FIGHT, FLIGHT, OR FREEZE

Communication styles also convey fight, flight, or freeze. Getting in the last word and keep arguing (fight). Hanging up the phone (flight), leaving prematurely (flight). Not listening; not sharing, or no response (Freeze). Use cool-down methods such as deep breathing or mindful stretching.

20 AUDITORY (A) COMMUNICATORS

Auditory learners tune in to auditory words. To gain their attention use words that signify auditory cues: "During this session, we want to ensure everyone is "heard." "I hear your concern."

21 KINESTHETIC (K) COMMUNICATORS

Kinesthetic words deal with feelings and comfort: "I want everyone to feel safe and comfortable." "This atmosphere feels wonderful." "I know you feel unheard and I want to..."

22 VISUAL (V) COMMUNICATORS

Use words that are visual: "When an idea comes to mind, please raise your hand so the facilitator sees you." "Please use the emoji at the bottom of the screen."

23 TRY TO MIX (A, K, & V) STYLES

"During this session, we want to hear everyone's voice (A) and ensure that each of you feels safe and valued (K). Give me a thumbs-up if you can hear me in the back of the room (V)."

24 DIVERSITY

Recognize the potential for a diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the room. See the world through multiple perspectives: yours, theirs, and an imagined neutral observer. What emotions and goals are present?

25 STUDY THE OPPOSITION'S GOALS

To hold a more fruitful conversation, imagine the other person's goals, objectives, and needs. What do they want and why? What are the viable alternatives where each person saves face?

YOU CAN REGAIN
Rapport!

26 USE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Internal tools are your skills, charisma, and talent. External tools are your handouts, facts, data, & illustrations.



Scenario example

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise simulating an advocacy group promoting child-friendly visiting rooms at a local prison. During the kick-off meeting, the group will develop a list of stakeholders to support the project. Anthony is adamant about not including prison officers (POs) in the activity. During the meeting, he declared, “I know you believe prison staff should be involved, but I don’t like working with POs. They treated me poorly when I was incarcerated 10 years ago.”

Roles: Anthony(advocate), Advocacy Members Facilitator/Group Leader



Problem: Designing and implementing an enhanced play area for children at the local prison requires collaboration and input from prison officers. The advocacy group must convince Anthony to collaborate.



Using effective communication strategies, role-play & discuss how an Advocacy Member can convince Anthony to collaborate with groups related to his past difficulties.



What emotions are present?
What is Anthony’s goal?
What are the Advocacy Members’ goals?
What is the ideal outcome goal (s)?



Collaborate with your group, using the tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide to convince Anthony to collaborate.

Scenario analysis



In reviewing the scenario, it is likely that the advocacy group worked hard to prepare and present an agenda designed to encourage the recruitment of multiple stakeholders, including the prison officials at the local prison. They likely researched models of successful projects at prisons and realized that buy-in from the prison officers and the Warden are critical success factors. However, when Anthony resisted having prison staff as a member of the team, the advocacy group became discouraged with him. This could demotivate and undermine the whole project. Consequently, the group's emotions are running high. The facilitator must strive to regain focus and control of the meeting. Here's how things could have gone better using effective communication skills.

Facilitator Effective Communication


Establish Clear Goals. Facilitator talking points might include: "Today's goals include identifying stakeholders for our Child-Visits Enhancement Project (goals alignment). As we consider (linking) developing a list of team members for recruitment, let us focus on the internal and external resources required to implement this project (negotiate). While we consider our options, remember that each team member's voices, concerns, and ideas are welcome for discussion (safety/kinesthetic). We want to hear from each of you (auditory). Now, I'd like us to create a list of all stakeholders on the whiteboard, to visualize (visual) who can help us meet our project goals (leadership, direction, & containment). We then can evaluate the pros and cons of how each resource meets the project needs (emphasis on the needs rather than job titles). We can also discuss the characteristics of individuals who match the team's criteria (empowers the team to decide who meets their criteria for team collaborators).

Facilitator's Insights

The facilitator may discern that Anthony's initial comment conveyed his past experience of feeling underappreciated, disregarded, and even angry about past engagement with POs. If the facilitator ignores Anthony's response, this compounds the situation. Tension may build between all team members. By acknowledging his feelings: "Thank you, Anthony, your previous experience with that individual must have been horrible (validate). Thank goodness not all people are cut from the same cloth (states that not all people are alike). It is important to identify characteristics of people that include using respect and collaboration skills (returns the power of decision making to the team). This means that as we focus on the characteristics of ideal team members, we need to be very selective in defining who is best suited to serve on the team." This response shows the facilitator's respect for Anthony's comment. This response also redirects the focus from the behavior of a specific individual Anthony recalls, to that of a future-focused goal of selecting people who meet the characteristics valued by the team.

Anthony's Response

While the facilitator bears responsibility to keep the meeting on track, Anthony also could have used better communication techniques. For example, he could have said, "I hope that after we list each stakeholder, we can discuss ways to ensure that each team member meets the criteria of showing respect and treating everyone with dignity."



Scenario 1

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise simulating a challenging interaction between a **prison officer** and a **family member** visiting a loved one in prison. The scenario will focus on navigating inconsistencies in treatment and interpretation of the visiting rules.

Roles: Sarah, Prison Officer (PO)



Problem: The last time Sarah, a family member visited her brother, the guard at the entrance was rude to her. Sarah plans to address the issue with the current PO, hoping to have a better outcome.



Using effective communication strategies, role-play Sarah speaking with a P.O. about inconsistent treatment and visiting policies.



What are the goals of the prison officers?
What is Sarah's goal?
What emotions are present? What is the ideal outcome goal (s)?



Collaborate with your group, using the tipsheets: *Confident Conversations*. Discuss how Sara's can broach talking with the PO.

Scenario 2

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise simulating a 3-year-old child of a Dad who is incarcerated. The 3-year-old asks his mother questions about his father who has been absent for 30 days.

Roles: 3-year-old Joey, Mother: Mercy



Problem: Joey misses his dad. His mother, Mercy is afraid to tell Joey that his dad will be in prison for the next 1.5 years. Joey asks the same question every day: “I miss my dad. Where is my Dad? Mercy always responds: Dad is at work.”



Using effective communication strategies, role-play Joey asking his mom about his dad’s whereabouts. Mercy should role-play answering Joey’s question using effective communication.



What emotions are present?
What is Joey’s goal?
What is Mercy’s goal?
What is the outcome goal?



Collaborate with your group, using the tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* and as a guide & the AIAC “Mastering Big Topics with Children” for discussion tips.

Scenario 3

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise simulating a newlywed named Cindy whose husband John, was recently arrested and jailed. Cindy's co-workers have invited the couple to a picnic. However, John is unable to attend because he is in jail. Cindy feels like she is living a lie and hiding the truth every time John's name comes up in a conversation. Her shame and guilt escalate, each time she turns down an invitation or makes excuses about John to her coworkers. Cindy feels like a liar, and she is ashamed of herself.

Roles: Cindy (wife), Linda: (coworker)



Problem: Linda offers Cindy and her husband John an invitation to a picnic. Cindy is debating whether she should share John's whereabouts. She is ashamed and feels both guilt and grief from telling lies.



Using effective communication strategies, role-play how Cindy can use effective communication to respond to Linda while maintaining boundaries and dignity.



What emotions are present?
What is Linda's goal?
What is Cindy's goal?
What is the ideal outcome goal?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide. Consider what to say and what not to say.

Scenario 4

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise demonstrating the importance of inclusive, humanizing, phrasing. Use “people-first” phrasing such as: a person with/of or from before stating the distinction/deficit/problem. “A person with a disability, a child of an incarcerated parent, a person of color, a person who chooses gender neutrality.” When uncertain, use names or ask for pronouns: They/Them, He/Him, She/Her

Roles: Natasha (guard), Ben (visitor)



Problem: Natasha is a prison guard. Ben is a visitor who waited over 30 minutes to have his ID verified, while at least 10 others were checked in. Natasha withheld Ben’s ID because his ID photo appeared to be a woman. Natasha’s supervisor spoke with Ben, and he revealed his gender marker change document and was then cleared for a visit.



Using effective communication strategies, role-play how Natasha could have handled the situation with Ben’s photo ID. Role-play how Ben could handle the situation. For all responses, consider dignity and respect.



What emotions are present?
What is Ben’s goal?
What is Natasha’s goal?
What is the ideal outcome goal?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide.

Reference: Identification documents and transgender people: <https://transequality.org>

*Name change order & gender marker

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Scenario 5

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise demonstrating why one should only give advice when solicited. Lenny has 3 young children, with the youngest still in diapers. His wife was just sentenced to incarceration for substance use. Luckily, his mother is retired and lives 5 miles away. Upon learning of his wife's incarceration, Lenny's mom, offered, "What you need to do is divorce her." When the phrase "you need" is used, it implies that you know better than your communication partner.

Roles: Lenny (husband/dad), Mom/Grandmother



Problem: Lenny just returned from his wife's sentencing. Upon learning of the 1.5 year sentence, Lenny's mom made disparaging remarks, "What you need to do is divorce her." Lenny is stressed and wondering how he is going to make it with 3 children while his wife is absent. He is dependent upon his mother's caregiving, yet he still loves his wife.



Using effective communication strategies, role-play how Lenny's mom can manage her disappointment, anger, and frustration while supporting her grandchildren and son. How should Lenny respond to his mother while maintaining his own dignity and respect?



What emotions are present?
What is the mom's goal?
What is Lenny's goal?
What is the ideal outcome goal?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide.

Scenario 6

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise demonstrating why the intersection of race and mass incarceration are important topics to address. Lisa is a woman of African descent, who identifies as queer. Lisa and Bill are preparing a conference presentation. Bill is a cis-gendered White Male. Their topic is related to the impacts of incarceration on individuals with mental health issues.

Roles: Bill (co-presenter), Lisa (co-presenter)



Problem: The presentation abstract calls for 300 words. Bill cannot understand why a presentation related to mental health needs to include issues of race that may exceed the space limit. Lisa insists that discussions related to incarceration must include a focus on race, especially for people of color and of African descent.



Using effective communication strategies, discuss how each party can be validated in their assumptions while maintaining dignity and respect.



What emotions are present?
What are Lisa's goals?
What are Lenny's goals?
What are the ideal outcome goals?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide. Discuss rationale for creating the abstract.

Scenario 7

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise demonstrating why discussions on spirituality, faith, and religion require careful communication skills. Samuel and Muhammad are residents of a residential reentry center. Samuel is Jewish and Muhammad is Muslim. For the past 4 weeks, the breakfast menu contained pork sausage and non-dairy eggs. Each day, the resident monitor ignores their requests for a menu change.

Roles: Samuel (Resident), Muhammad (Resident) Resident Monitor (RM)



Problem: Samuel and Muhammad have complained to the Resident Monitors and Case Manager that their dietary requirements are not met or honored. Both residents have threatened to write the mayor's office and contact the local press, but fear retaliation. The Resident Monitor believes that both men are just complaining like the rest of the residents.



Using effective communication strategies, discuss the implications of not honoring each resident's religious conviction. How can the Resident Monitor (RM), Samuel, and Muhammad communicate while maintaining their dignity and respect?



What emotions are present?
What are the RM's goals?
What are Samuel and Muhammad's goals?
What is the ideal outcome goal?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide. Decide a win-win discussion for all.

Scenario 8

In this activity, participants will engage in a role-playing exercise demonstrating the sensitivity of discussing politics and incarceration. Emilia recently joined a well-known advocacy group located in Houston, TX. When the group brainstormed the upcoming advocacy focus, Emilia indicated that the group has failed its mission because they are not focused on children who are separated from families at the border. Several of the advocates became frustrated during the meeting when trying to explain the limits of their mission.

Roles: Emilia (new advocate), Meeting Facilitator Group Members



Problem: During the latest advocacy meeting, Emilia became frustrated and shouted to group members, “You will never meet your advocacy goals for children with incarcerated parents until you fight for those children in cages, in San Antonio!” This outburst left the team flabbergasted.



Using effective communication strategies, discuss how Emilia could broach her concerns with the group. Further, discuss what the meeting facilitator should say to maintain meeting protocol, group respect, and dignity for all.



What emotions are present?
What are Emilia’s goals?
What are the Group Member goals?
What are the ideal outcome goals?



Collaborate with your group, using the Tipsheets: *Confident Conversations* as a guide. Discuss the optimal approach to the meeting.

Notes

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