

Lesson 12.1 Confirming and Disconfirming Communication Climates



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Do you feel organized, or confined, in a clean workspace? Are you more productive when the sun is shining than when it's gray and cloudy outside? Just as factors like weather and physical space impact us, communication climate influences our interpersonal interactions. **Communication climate** is the “*overall feeling or emotional mood between people*” Wood, Julia T. *Interpersonal Communication in Everyday Encounters*. 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 245.

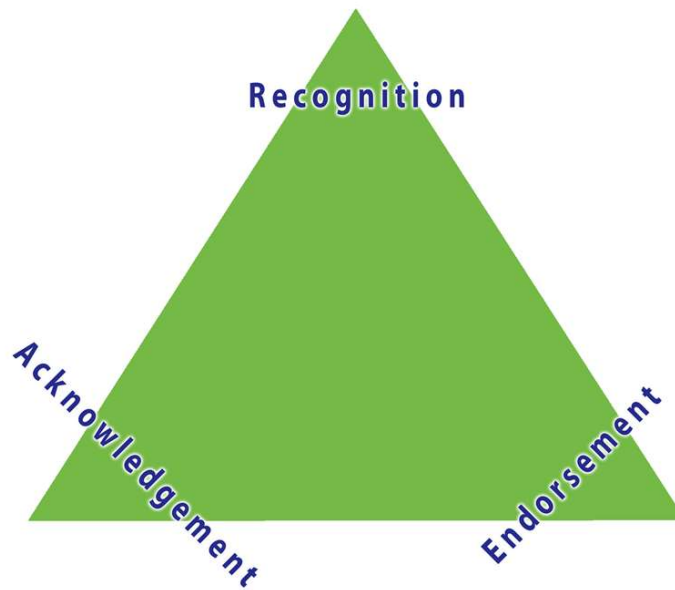
If you dread going to visit your family during the holidays because of tension between you and your sister, or you look forward to dinner with a particular set of friends because they make you laugh, you are responding to the *communication climate*—the overall mood that is created because of the people involved and the type of communication they bring to the interaction. Let's take a closer look at two types of communication climate.

Confirming and Disconfirming Climates

Positive and negative climates can be understood along three dimensions— recognition, acknowledgment, and endorsement. We experience **Confirming Climates** when we receive messages that demonstrate our value and worth from those with whom we have a relationship. Conversely, we experience **Disconfirming Climates** when we receive messages that suggest we are devalued and unimportant.

Most of us like to be in confirming climates because they foster emotional safety as well as personal and relational growth. However, it is likely that your relationships fall somewhere between the two extremes.

Let's look at three types of messages that create confirming and disconfirming climates.




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- **Recognition Messages:** *Recognition messages either confirm or deny another person's existence.* For example, if a friend enters your home and you smile, hug him, and say, "I'm so glad to see you" you are confirming his existence. If you say "good morning" to a colleague and she ignores you by walking out of the room without saying anything, she is creating a disconfirming climate by not recognizing you as a unique individual.
- **Acknowledgment Messages:** *Acknowledgment messages go beyond recognizing another's existence by confirming what they say or how they feel.* Nodding our head while listening, or laughing appropriately at a funny story, are nonverbal acknowledgment messages. When a friend tells you she had a really bad day at work and you respond with, "Yeah, that does sound hard, do you want to go

somewhere quiet and talk?”, you are acknowledging and responding to her feelings. In contrast, if you were to respond to your friend’s frustrations with a comment like, “That’s nothing. Listen to what happened to me today,” you would be ignoring her experience and presenting yours as more important.

- **Endorsement Messages:** *Endorsement messages go one step further by recognizing a person’s feelings as valid.* Suppose a friend comes to you upset after a fight with his girlfriend. If you respond with, “Yeah, I can see why you would be upset” you are endorsing his right to feel upset. However, if you said, “Get over it. At least you have a girlfriend” you would be sending messages that deny his right to feel frustrated in that moment. While it is difficult to see people we care about in emotional pain, people are responsible for their own emotions. When we let people own their emotions and do not tell them how to feel, we are creating supportive climates that provide a safe environment for them to work through their problems.

Scott T. Paynton and Linda K. Hahn, Survey of Communication Study, Humboldt State University, https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study.  [\(https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study\)](https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study). [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)  [\(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

As we’ve learned, self-disclosure is essential to forming interpersonal relationships, and yet the quality of the relationship that is developed is based on whether the disclosure occurs within a confirming or disconfirming climate. Messages of recognition, acknowledgment, and endorsement are confirming and will help move a relationship forward. However, relationships which attempt to develop within disconfirming climates become stilted and damaged, most likely leaving at least one of the individuals involved emotionally “wounded”. Let’s delve into two extreme instances of toxic cruelty-- Bullying and Rankism.

Bullying

Children can be unthinking and cruel. We know from our past experiences on the playground, in our neighborhoods, and through our elementary years, the teasing, name-calling, and insults are demeaning and dangerous to our emotional as physical health. It often doesn’t stop, and may actually increase during high school. In an atmosphere of complete disregard for the “other,” we find ourselves within Martin Buber’s “I-it” relationship (see Unit 1) where we are being treated or are treating others as less than personal-- less than valued and unique. We find ourselves within the

realm of the "impersonal" where a person is treated as a "thing" or "object".

"Disconfirmed" individuals are not "recognized". They are not not "acknowledged," and most definitely they are not "endorsed."

In our move to adulthood then, we should not be surprised that bullying with all its pain and ferocity does not always subside when we enter the workforce. In fact, research shows that one in three adults has experienced some type of bullying on the job. Lauren Petrecca, "Bullying by the Boss Is Common but Hard to Fix," *USA Today*, December 27, 2010, accessed September 13, 2011.



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Workplace bullying is defined as situations where an employee repeatedly and over a prolonged time period is exposed to harassing behavior from one or more colleagues (including subordinates and leaders) and where the targeted person is unable to defend against the systematic mistreatment. Consequently, workplace bullying is not about single episodes of conflict or harassment, but rather a form of persistent abuse where the exposed employee is submissive to the perpetrator. Nielsen, M. B., & Einarsen, S. (2018). What we know, what we do not know, and what we should and could have known about workplace bullying: An overview of the literature and agenda for future research. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 42*, 71-83.

From a scientific perspective, this definition suggests that there are three main characteristics of workplace bullying. First, an employee becomes the "target" of systematic negative and unwanted social behaviors in the workplace. Secondly, the exposure occurs over a long time-period. Thirdly, the "target" experiences that he or she cannot easily escape the situation, nor stop the unwanted treatment.

Conceptually, it is the unrelenting feeling of being trapped and victimized by the harassment, which distinguishes bullying from other forms of aggression and mistreatment in the workplace. S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, C.L. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace. International perspectives in research and practice*, Taylor & Francis, London (2003), pp. 62-78.

This type of behavior has psychological and emotional consequences, but it also has the potential to damage a company's reputation and finances. While there are often mechanisms in place to help an employee deal with harassment—reporting to Human Resources for example—the situation may be trickier if the bully is your boss. In this case, many employees may be afraid to complain for fear of retaliation like getting fired. Transferring to another part of the organization or getting another job altogether may for some be a less viable option.



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Another form of toxic animosity found within disconfirming communication climates is known as *rankism*. This form of harassment occurs in various settings and can be as harmful (and as devastating) as bullying.

Rankism

What is Rankism?




Robert W. Fuller. (2017, October 3). *What is Rankism?* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ7SVTxROVw>  (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ7SVTxROVw>)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJ7SVTxROVw>

Robert Fuller has been investigating the dangerous consequences of rankism for several years. Read his seminal research which was outlined in *Psychology Today* in 2013: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/somebodies-and-nobodies/201308/curing-the-poison-rankism>  (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/somebodies-and-nobodies/201308/curing-the-poison-rankism>)

We'll use this article as the basis of our next reflective writing assignment.

In Summary

- Communication climate is the overall feeling or emotional mood between people.
- Confirming Climates are experienced when environments of value and worth are created.

- Disconfirming Climates are developed when individuals are made to feel devalued and unimportant.
- Rankism and bullying continue to be key contributors to the most damaging of communication climates.