

co·wonders



**coffee**  
**in the pot**

## coffee in the pot

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### What is it about:

- how we send and receive messages
- the different meanings every message can have
- creation of effective communications based on the reduction of miscommunication

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**SOURCE:** Communication investigation done by Friedemann Schulz Von Thun, also known as the 4-ears model or the communication square.

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**domains:** effective communication, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and dialogue

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### approach description:

A sentence from Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian ethologist, can help us to understand why this communication canvas useful:

*“What is thought is not always said; what is said is not always heard; what is heard is not always understood; what is understood is not always agreed; what is agreed is not always done; what is done is not always done again.”*

Lorenz tries to make us understand that communication is a fragile chain where every step, starting from the thoughts to the speaking or action, can break down very easily.

This can be translated into the tool created by Von Thun. Let's put a very typical example: A person is seeing their parents pouring a coffee from the pot and asks “hey, is there some more coffee left?”. The parent replies: “I am not your servant”.

Based on the model of Von Thun, every message has four layers:

- **Analytical or factual.** What I am informing myself about.
- **Appeal.** What I want to achieve.
- **Relationship.** My relationship to the receiver.
- **Self-disclosure or therapeutical.** What I show of myself.

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In our example, the person's message (sender) could be:

- **Analytical.** *Is there more coffee left in the pot?*
- **Appeal.** *I would like some coffee, and I hope there's enough left.*
- **Relationship.** *I trust you enough to ask you casually.*
- **Self-disclosure.** *Could you let me know if there's coffee left, or maybe pour me some?*

**Intended message:** *I'm curious if there's more coffee and indirectly hoping you'll share or let me know.*

From the parent's (receiver) perspective it could be:

- **Factual.** *They're asking if there's more coffee left.*
- **Appeal.** (what I think they want). *You want me to pour coffee for you.*
- **Relationship.** (what I hear about us). *I You see me as someone who serves you or caters to your needs.*
- **Self-disclosure.** (what they might think about themselves). *I feel like I'm always being asked to do things.*

**Intended message:** *You expect me to serve you coffee, and I'm annoyed by that expectation.*

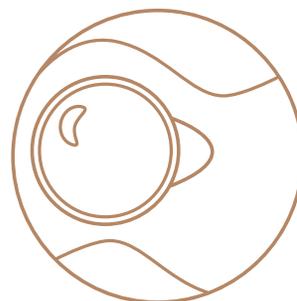
This example can be translated into multiple situations of our day to day. Von Thun believed that in order to avoid miscommunication and different understandings of the messages we need to build the dialogue between parts.

In other words, good communication occurs when intention and understanding are in harmony.

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## aim of use:

Von Thun's tool can be used to improve communication by helping people understand the multiple layers of every message, reducing misunderstandings, and fostering clearer, more empathetic interactions. It can be used also to strengthen relationships and to facilitate conflict resolution. On the personal side, it can help us build our self-awareness and our communication patterns.



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## educational method:

### • Step 1: Introduction to the 4-ears

Prepare the coffee example role-play with a facilitator or another colleague so it can be more visual. Once done, ask them:

- What messages the parent could have heard?
- What messages did the person wanted to send?

Once ideas are shared, explain Von Thun communication's model.

### • Step 2: Example scenario

Prepare another example, there are multiple, so feel free to adjust them to the context and space you are at the moment:

**Person A:** *"It's freezing in here."*

**Person B:** *"Well, I'm perfectly fine, thank you very much."*

**Person A:** *"The sink is full of dirty dishes again."*

**Person B:** *"Why are you always blaming me?"*

**Person A:** *"This song always puts me in a good mood."*

**Person B:** *"Should I turn up the volume for you?"*

Unite participants into four (or eight) small groups.

Assign each group one "ear": Factual, Appeal, Relationship and Self-disclosure

Ask each group to discuss:

- How would their "ear" hear (interpret) the message?
- Why might the misunderstanding have happened?

### • Step 3: Group reflection

Each group shares their findings. Write their findings in a flipchart under each of the four ears. Try to highlight the differences in perception and where the communication broke down.

Feel free to ask them questions to reflect on the communication patterns or situations that could build this misunderstanding.



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## ● Step 4: The 4-ears role-play

Ask 2 volunteers to replay the coffee scenario with an adjusted communication:

- The **person** clarifies their intention
- The **parent** listens with all four ears

They both need to ask questions between themselves (feedback) and clarify the intention and the action. “So do you mean...?”, “So do you want me to...?”, “I want to make sure we’re on the same page...”

Once finalised, ask them how they feel and if they reached an agreement for the coffee.

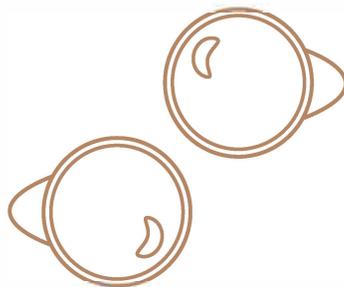
## ● Step 5: Debriefing

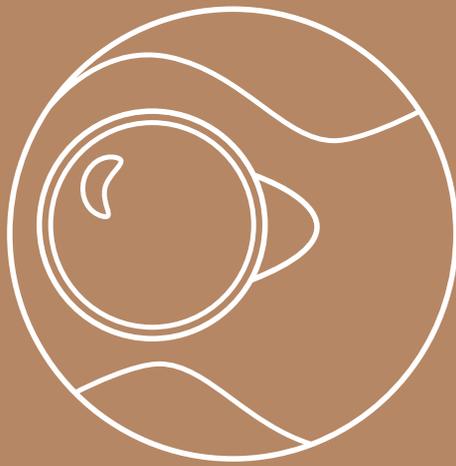
- Did it ever see any of these scenarios in your life? Can you relate to the role-plays?
- Which “ear” do you tend to use more when listening?
- Why do you think misunderstandings happen?
- How can we build on better communication, both as a sender and a receiver?
- How can you apply this tool in your daily conversations?

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## read more:

- **Website:** The official web of Von Thun
- **Book:** Talking with Each Other - The Key to Good Communication (1981). Friedemann Schulz von Thun
- **Article:** The 4-ears model might change your communication forever. Lisa Maria Höber (2024)





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