

Solution Seeking System - Communication Protocol Guide

The **Communication Protocol** for Solution Seeking is the core process of the Solution Seeking System, a framework for resolving disagreements, improving relationships, and generating sustainable solutions in any setting. It is designed to replace reactive, adversarial conversations with a structured, respectful approach that leads to understanding and actionable results.

The protocol follows three steps:

1. **Introspection** – Understand yourself first: your feelings, needs, and goals.
2. **Mutual Understanding** – Work to fully understand the other person's perspective, and ensure they understand yours.
3. **Solution Seeking** – Collaboratively develop and agree on specific, measurable solutions.

This guide is meant to be both a teaching tool and a practical reference. You can use it to prepare for important conversations, guide real-time dialogue, or review your process afterward. Each step includes mindset principles, best practices, and example prompts to help you stay grounded in compassion, curiosity, and clarity.

The goal is not to “win” a conversation, but to understand and be understood and then to co-create solutions that strengthen the system you're part of. Whether you're addressing a small misunderstanding or a long-standing challenge, this protocol gives you a repeatable path to repair, growth, and trust.

How to Use This Guide

- **Before a Conversation** – Read through the Introspection section first. Answer the guiding questions and check your intentions before engaging.
- **During a Conversation** – Use the Mutual Understanding step as your compass. Refer to the best practices and example phrases to stay focused on clarity, compassion, and curiosity.
- **When Moving to Action** – Follow the Solution Seeking step to shape ideas into clear, measurable, and fair solutions.
- **After the Conversation** – Review the outcome together. Use the follow-up and evaluation guidance to adjust as needed and ensure the solution is working.
- **As a Learning Tool** – Revisit this document regularly to sharpen your skills and integrate the process into your everyday interactions.

By using the protocol consistently, you will build stronger relationships, resolve conflicts more effectively, and contribute to a culture of trust, fairness, and shared problem-solving.

Step 1: Introspection

Effective conflict resolution begins with understanding ourselves before engaging with others. By examining our own feelings and perspectives first, we create a foundation for more productive conversations and lasting resolutions.

What's Required for Introspection

Before initiating a conversation about a problem with another person, it's essential to understand your own feelings and reactions. Introspection requires:

- **Critical thinking:** Examining your thoughts objectively
- **Compassion:** For both yourself and the other person
- **Forgiveness:** Being willing to move past hurt
- **Humility:** Being willing to admit mistakes and learn from them

Understanding Your Emotions

Recognizing Emotional Signals

Fear, anger, shame, and frustration are all indicators of a problem. They are not the problem itself. If you hold onto them, you won't be able to explore other perspectives or get a deeper understanding of your own.

- Treat emotions as notifications rather than the problem itself
- Acknowledge them, then let them go to explore the real issue
- Use physiological practices like breathing techniques to move past initial feelings

The Introspection Process

1. **Think about your Perspective:** Write down or recount your current perspective on what had happened.
2. **Identify your first impression:** What is the most clear emotion you're feeling right now? It could be Frustration, Anger, Fear, Embarrassment, Shame, or something else.
3. **Start digging deeper:** Now we need to examine that first impression and figure out why we're feeling this way. This is where we use **Forgiveness**. We need to allow ourselves to move past the discomfort so we can understand why we feel it. Ask yourself what other emotions, experiences, and motivations added up to your initial feelings.

4. **Name your feelings:** After digging deeper, we can identify (and ask more questions about) the emotions we think lead us to our initial feelings.
5. **Ask more questions:** Keep asking yourself questions until you feel you have a good understanding of how you felt and why you felt that way. This is where **Critical Thinking** will help a lot! Some examples are:
 - "Why does that hurt?"
 - "Was it anger that I saw? Why did they feel that way?"
 - "What is the tension I feel?"
 - "Why does that matter?"
 - "Why do I feel that way?"
6. **Explore with Compassion:** Now think about **them**. Put yourself in their shoes and exercise both **Empathy** and **Compassion**. The other person is a human that has a past, who has fears, who has good days and bad days. We all want something relatively similar from life: safety, connection, and purpose. Some examples of questions you may want to ask are:
 - "Is it possible there's something else going on that made them act that way?"
 - "Could I have misunderstood them?"
 - "What could compel me to act the way they did?"
 - "Could I have done something that was misunderstood by them?"
 - "Could I have done something differently that would have had a better outcome?"
7. **Identify Outcomes:** What can you take from your introspection that can help you in the next step: Mutual Understanding? We should try to look for a few things here:
 - **Good questions** to ask them when we talk to them that may help create clarity for both of us.
 - **Objectives** for the conversation. What do we want to achieve when we talk to them?
 - **A clearer way to express ourselves** when we talk to them. Clarity is Kindness, and the clearer we can be about our actions, intentions, and feelings, the better they can understand us.

Here's an example of an Introspection



Exploring Multiple Perspectives

Your Perspective

An example from an imaginary workplace setting:

- **Your Perspective:** "Brian snapped at me a little bit and didn't let me finish talking when I tried to tell him he was putting the mop away wrong."
- **Initial reaction:** "I was angry"
- **Start Digging:** "Why was I angry at him for that?"
- **Naming your feelings:**
 - "I was trying to help him, but it felt like he was lashing out at me in return and angry at me for trying to help."
 - "I wanted him to appreciate what I was trying to do, but it seemed like he didn't, and now I feel this tension."
 - "It was rude to be unkind to me when I wasn't trying to be unkind to him."
- **Digging Deeper(Asking more questions):**
 - "Was it anger that I saw? Why did he feel that way?"
 - "What is the tension I feel?"
 - "Why does that hurt?"
- **Exploring With Compassion:**
 - "Maybe it wasn't anger but insecurity that he didn't know the right way to put the mop away or fear that I would see him as unintelligent or something."
 - "Maybe it's uncertainty about the future. If that interaction didn't go well, what will happen next time I try to talk about something?"
 - "I was putting effort into being helpful, but it wasn't recognized, it was seen as something else. Now I'm afraid he thinks I'm something I'm not."

Their Perspective

A crucial reminder: The other person's perspective is unknowable until you ask them.

- Reflecting on the fact that you don't know their perspective yet
- Considering alternative explanations with compassion: "Maybe it wasn't anger but insecurity that he didn't know the right way"
- Remembering that just as you didn't fully understand your feelings initially, they may not understand theirs

Preparing for Conversation

After thorough introspection, prepare for dialogue by considering:

1. What do I want to ask?
2. What are my goals for the conversation?
3. How can we avoid this problem in the future?
4. What could help them understand where I'm coming from?

What to Avoid

- Not being willing to listen or understand
- Gossiping to others and damaging relationships
- Intending to hurt the other person
- Remaining stuck in secondary emotions like anger

Final Thoughts on Introspection

Introspection is the foundation of effective conflict resolution. By understanding your own feelings, considering multiple perspectives with compassion, and preparing thoughtful questions, you create the conditions for productive dialogue. Remember that the goal is not to "win" but to understand and be understood, ultimately finding solutions that work for all parties involved.

Step 2: Mutual Understanding

Creating a shared understanding is the **first step to finding a lasting solution** to a problem. Without taking the time to explore each other's perspectives, we risk making hasty decisions that will lead to more misunderstandings and frustration. That exploration is uncomfortable because it means acknowledging our fears, faults, and allowing ourselves to shift our perspective to see the other person more clearly. By engaging in these conversations with vulnerability and trusting that the other person will do the same for you, we can build a mutual understanding, and that makes finding actionable solutions possible.

Essential Mindset

- **Nothing can be resolved until understanding is reached**
- Communication requires talking and mutual vulnerability
- Approach conversations with trust and a willingness to be uncomfortable

What's Required for Mutual Understanding

- **Bravery:** Courage to initiate difficult conversations
- **Patience:** Allowing time for thoughts and feelings to be expressed
- **Empathy:** Seeing situations from the other person's perspective
- **Compassion:** Caring about the other person
- **Flexibility:** Adapting your approach based on the conversation
- **Good Faith:** Assuming positive intent from the other person
- **Trust:** Believing in the honesty of the other person's communication

Preparing for the Conversation

Setting the Stage

- **Coordinate timing:** Work with others to make time for the talk
- **Create privacy:** Find a space free from external pressures and interruptions
- **Ensure comfort:** Make the environment comfortable for both parties
 - Consider offering food/drinks: A thoughtful gesture that helps reduce stress
 - Showing that you are thinking about them is a good way to encourage Good Faith during the conversation.

Important Considerations

- **One-on-one format:** Avoid bringing additional people to the conversation as this can:
 - Make the other person feel ganged up on
 - Push them into a defensive position
 - Create social discomfort if their image is damaged in front of others
- **Allow cooling-off time:** If tensions are high, give people time to process. Don't wait so long that the events aren't clear enough for meaningful conversation. Find the right balance.
- **Set a specific time:** Ask for commitment to a specific day and time rather than leaving it indefinite.

Starting the Conversation

Initial Approach

- **Express gratitude:** Thank the person for being willing to talk
 - Example: "Hey Brian! Thank you for agreeing to talk to me."
- **Remember:** Talking about difficult topics is hard; acknowledge their willingness

Setting the Tone

- **Clarity is kindness:** Be clear and upfront about your intentions
 - Example: "I wanted to talk about a communication issue I think we had and find a good way to fix it for us."
- **State your goals explicitly:**
 - To be understood and to understand
 - To help, not hurt
 - To fix the issue

Sharing Your Perspective

Presenting Your View

- **Ask permission:** "Do you mind if I give you a breakdown of the issue from my perspective?"
- **Define the problem:** Clearly articulate how you see the situation
- **Stay calm:** Avoid aggression, jabs, or unkind accusations
- **Keep it conversational:** Allow for responses and maintain dialogue

Managing Responses

- If they say: "Absolutely! What's going on?" - Proceed with your perspective
- If they say: "I think I know what this is about!" - Suggest a structured approach:
 - "I think it's important that I help you understand my perspective of the situation and then have you help me understand yours so we can find a solution. Is it ok if I go first for the sake of clarity?"
- **Get buy-in:** Asking permission ensures it feels like a collaborative process. And makes it more likely that it will be a collaborative process!

Understanding Their Perspective

Inviting Their View

- **Make a clear transition:** "Thank you for letting me explain my perspective. Can you help me understand how you felt and the way you see what happened?"
- **Create space:** Allow them to fully express themselves without interruption

Active Listening Principles

- **Be patient:** Let them say everything they want to
- **Reserve judgment:** Don't lead with emotions
- **Trust their honesty:** Assume they are being truthful
- **Manage your reactions:**
 - If you feel frustrated or angry, set those emotions aside temporarily
 - Listen for context before reacting
 - Filter what they say through empathy to temper your feelings

- Design responses that work toward your goals

Asking the Right Questions

Exploring Emotions

- **Inquire about feelings:** "How did that make you feel?"
- **Be patient:** Resist feelings of anger or frustration
- **Remember your goal:** To understand, not to win an argument

Digging Deeper

- **Help them explore reasons:** "Do you think you felt that way because of...?"
- **Show understanding:** "I see what you mean, I would feel that way if I felt like someone was thinking... too."
- **Explore underlying concerns:** "Do you think that may be rooted in a fear that someone may see you as...?"
- **Summarize for clarity:** "Sounds like you felt that way because of..."

Important Reminders

- **This is the hard part** - they haven't had the opportunity to process their feelings as you have
- **Be careful and patient** - if they feel you're hostile or unkind, they'll shut down
- **Remember your goals:** to understand, fix, and improve communication/trust
- **Respect** the difficulty of untangling emotions
- Keep your eyes on the **goals** even when tensions rise
- Design your responses purposefully
- Think about both perspectives, **not just yours**
- Explore with **compassion**
- Just as you may not have fully understood your feelings initially, **they may not fully understand theirs**

Final Thoughts on Mutual Understanding

Effective communication is a "two-player game" that requires mutual participation and respect. By approaching difficult conversations with empathy, clarity, and purpose, you create an environment where understanding can flourish and conflicts can be resolved constructively. Remember that vulnerability and trust are essential components of meaningful communication, and the willingness to engage in uncomfortable conversations demonstrates your commitment to the relationship.

Step 3: Solution Seeking

Solution seeking is the third step in a collaborative problem-solving process. After developing a mutual understanding of the problem and each other's perspectives, this phase focuses on transforming emerging ideas into concrete, actionable solutions with clear accountability measures.

What's Required for Solution Seeking

To effectively engage in solution seeking, participants should cultivate:

- **Humility** - To remain open to others' ideas
- **Patience** - Throughout the iterative process
- **Critical Thinking** - For evaluating potential solutions
- **Flexibility** - To adapt as needed during implementation

The Solution Seeking Process

1. Problem Restatement

- Clearly articulate the problem as understood by all parties
- Incorporate mutual understanding gained during previous stages
- Ask if the restatement sounds right to all involved
- Confirm understanding to ensure everyone feels heard and is committed to moving forward

2. Brainstorming Solutions

- Engage all parties in generating potential solutions
- Ask if they can think of good approaches to address the problem
- Encourage diverse perspectives and creative thinking
- Consider various approaches without immediate judgment

3. Refining Solutions

A good solution should have these key characteristics:

- **Actionable** - Involves specific steps or actions that can be taken
- **Testable** - Includes measurable metrics to assess effectiveness
- **Effective** - Designed to produce tangible effects that directly address the problem

- **Time-bound** - Contains a clear timeframe for implementation and evaluation

4. Implementation

- Put the agreed-upon solution into action
- Execute the planned steps within the designated timeframe
- Maintain accountability throughout the process

5. Follow-Up

- After the timeframe has elapsed, check on the results
- Schedule a follow-up meeting (planned in advance) to discuss outcomes
- Gather feedback from all parties involved

6. Evaluation and Iteration

- Assess how everyone feels about the solution
- Evaluate whether the solution is equitable for all parties
 - If it only benefits one person or party, it's not perfect yet
 - Some discomfort may be necessary for growth, but solutions should feel fair to all
- If the solution isn't working effectively, be prepared to:
 - Iterate on the current approach
 - Develop a new solution altogether
 - Maintain patience and persistence throughout multiple attempts

Final Thoughts on Solution Seeking

The solution seeking process transforms mutual understanding into concrete action. By following this structured approach and embodying the essential qualities of humility, patience, critical thinking, and flexibility, parties can develop solutions that are not only effective but also equitable and sustainable. Remember that finding the right solution may require multiple iterations, and persistence is key to successful resolution.