
Styles of Communication

Communication, the sending and receiving of messages, is one of the most common of all human behaviors, playing a prominent role in nearly every interaction between two people. It should come as no surprise, then, that culture, a key factor in behavior, is likewise a key element in communication. What people say, how they say it, what they don't say—and especially what they *mean* by what they say—are all deeply affected by culture.

Edward T. Hall, one of the founders of the intercultural field, said that culture *is* communication. What he probably meant was that since so many of our waking hours are spent in one form of communication or another and culture is such a pervasive influence in communication, it's hard to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Whether they are one and the same or not, culture and communication certainly make an attractive couple.

In the cross-cultural context, communication, like everything else, gets complicated. What words mean, what nonverbal behaviors mean, the meaning of what is not said or done—all of these modes of communication are used differently by people in different cultures. In the end, whether the message you send is the one that gets received and whether the message you receive is the one that was sent are no longer foregone conclusions.

Chapter 3

Every country has its way of saying things. The important thing is that which lies behind people's words.

—Freya Stark
The Journey's Echo



Exercise 3.1

Dialogues

*If we listen to words merely,
and give them our own ha-
bitual values, we are bound
to go astray.*

—Freya Stark
The Journey's Echo

You will begin your exploration of communication with another diagnostic exercise, once again in the form of dialogues. A dialogue, you will recall from exercise 2.1, is a brief conversation between people from two different cultures which illustrates one or more cultural differences. The dialogues which follow illustrate differences between direct and indirect styles of communication, the major theme of this chapter.

Your task here, as before, is to read each dialogue and try to identify the cultural difference. Remember that dialogues are deliberately written in such a way that this difference may not jump out at you—just as it is not always obvious to speakers in similar real-life conversations—but it is there for those who can see it. If you can't, don't worry; the information in the rest of this chapter will help you get to the bottom of the dialogues.

As noted earlier, you may feel that the speakers in these dialogues need not come from different cultures in order to have these conversations, that the misunderstanding or confusion could easily occur between two speakers from the same culture. That is entirely possible, of course; the point here is not that a cultural difference is the *only* explanation for these kinds of misunderstandings, but that when the two parties involved come from different cultures, it is always a possible explanation.

After you have tried to figure out the dialogues, you should go ahead and complete the other exercises in this chapter. Later, you will be asked to return to this exercise and reread these dialogues in light of what you will then know about styles of communication.

You will, incidentally, find the “answers” to these dialogues—an explanation of what was happening in each one—at the end of this chapter in the section called “Dialogues Revisited” (pages 123–126). While you might be tempted to read these answers now, before working the intervening exercises, you are strongly encouraged to hold off; if you curb your curiosity now and then reread the dialogues as recommended, you will have the distinct pleasure of figuring them out on your own!

1. A Call from Hari

- MAGDA: I wonder where Hari is.
 BOB: Oh, I forgot to tell you. He called.
 MAGDA: He called?
 BOB: Yes. He said he was too busy to come over in person.
 MAGDA: But he always comes. And we have coffee together.
 BOB: I know. He said he was sorry and he would try to come next week.
 MAGDA: I'd better get over there and talk to him.
 BOB: I'd wait until next week if I were you. He's really busy.

2. A Bit of a Nuisance

- GITTI: How did it go with Arabella?
 KARL: Much better than I expected.
 GITTI: Did you explain everything to her?
 KARL: Yes. I said that we were very sorry but we weren't going to be able to meet the deadline.
 GITTI: What did she say?
 KARL: She just said “That's a bit of a nuisance” and started talking about something else.
 GITTI: That's a relief.

3. Saturday Shift

- MS. JONES: It looks like we're going to need some people to come in on Saturday.
- MR. WU: I see.
- MS. JONES: Can you come in on Saturday?
- MR. WU: Yes, I think so.
- MS. JONES: That'll be a great help.
- MR. WU: Yes. Saturday's a special day, did you know?
- MS. JONES: How do you mean?
- MR. WU: It's my son's birthday.
- MS. JONES: How nice. I hope you all enjoy it very much.
- MR. WU: Thank you. I appreciate your understanding.

4. Rewrite

- SUSAN: So, what did you think of my rewrite?
- YANG: Ah yes, the rewrite. Generally tighter than the first draft, don't you think?
- SUSAN: I do. Shall I send it down for printing, then?
- YANG: It's up to you, really.

Direct and Indirect Communication

The dimension of communication on which cultures differ the most and the one affecting more aspects of the communication dynamic is the matter of directness. The differences between the two poles of this dimension, directness and indirectness, probably account for more cross-cultural misunderstanding than any other single factor.¹ These two poles are described below:

Indirect/High Context: People in these cultures tend to infer, suggest, and imply rather than say things directly. At least that is how they appear to people from more direct/low-context cultures—though not, of course, to each other. These cultures tend to be more collectivist, where harmony and saving face are the greatest goods; hence, there is a natural tendency toward indirectness and away from confrontation. In collectivist cultures, ingroups are well established and members have an intuitive understanding of each other, in part because of shared experiences. This means that as a rule people don't need to spell things out or say very much to get their message across. This intuitive understanding is known as context, and in high-context cultures messages often don't even need words to be expressed; nonverbal communication may be enough, or the message may be expressed in terms of what is not said or done. The goal of most communication exchanges is preserving and strengthening the relationship with the other person.

Maintaining a peaceful, comfortable atmosphere is more important [to Koreans] than attaining immediate goals or telling the absolute truth. Koreans believe that to accomplish something while causing unhappiness or discomfort to individuals is to accomplish nothing at all.

—Sonja Vegdahl Hur and
Ben Seunghwa Hur
Culture Shock: Korea

¹ The important work of Edward T. Hall is a key source for all exercises dealing with the concept of high- and low-context cultures. See Recommended Reading.

Direct/Low Context: Direct cultures tend to be less collectivist and more individualist than indirect cultures, with less well-developed ingroups. People lead more independent lives and have fewer shared experiences; hence, there is less instinctive understanding of others. People need to spell things out and be more explicit, to say exactly what they mean rather than merely suggest or imply. There is less context, less that can be taken for granted. The spoken word carries most of the meaning; you should not read anything into what is not said or done. The goal of most communication exchanges is getting or giving information.

No culture uses the direct or indirect approach exclusively, but most cultures tend to be *more* one way than the other. Individuals within a given culture, of course, may be anywhere along the scale because of particular personal differences. As a general rule, though, you should expect to find most individuals on the same side of the divide as their culture as a whole.

The following exercise asks you to consider the definitions of *indirect/high-context* and *direct/low-context* communication styles as presented above and apply them to specific examples of behavior. Below you will find a list of twelve items, each of which is more representative of one pole of this dimension than the other. Read each item and put an *I* next to those behaviors more consistent with indirectness and a *D* next to those more consistent with directness.

- ___ 1. This is like the communication between siblings.
- ___ 2. This is like the communication between two casual acquaintances.
- ___ 3. People are reluctant to say no.
- ___ 4. You may have to read between the lines to understand what someone is saying.
- ___ 5. It's best to tell it like it is.
- ___ 6. Yes means yes.
- ___ 7. Yes means I hear you.

- ___ 8. There is no need to read between the lines.
- ___ 9. Who attends your meeting is an indication of how important you or the topic is.
- ___ 10. Who attends your meeting is an indication of who is available to attend.
- ___ 11. Silence may mean disapproval or dissatisfaction.
- ___ 12. People tell you what they think you want to hear.

Suggested Answers

- I 1. Members of the same family usually have considerable shared experiences, hence more innate understanding. They can thus be more indirect with each other.
- D 2. Because they share less common understanding, they have to be more direct.
- I 3. This is more characteristic of collectivist cultures, which prize harmony and are therefore more indirect.
- I 4. Understatement is classic indirect style.
- D 5. Some people don't like what they call "beating around the bush."
- D 6. Direct communicators should be interpreted fairly literally.
- I 7. Since saying no may not be an option, yes is more of an automatic response, which may not mean very much.
- D 8. This is because the lines (the words) are the primary carrier of meaning.
- I 9. Where words are not the primary carrier of meaning, other methods are used to communicate the message.
- D 10. Where words are the primary carrier of the message, you don't read so much extra meaning into nonverbal behaviors.
- I 11. If saying no is impolite and saying yes might mislead, then saying nothing can be the polite way of saying no.
- I 12. This saves face and preserves harmony.

Comparing Communication Styles across Cultures

This exercise is similar to the two continuum exercises in chapter 2 (Review Exercises on pages 48 and 78). In this instance, you will be comparing the communication style of your culture with that of your target cultures. Once you see your own culture's communication norms and expectations and those of your target cultures, you will be able to identify major cultural differences, differences that are a likely source of and explanation for common misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

You will be using the continua on pages 97–98 to make these comparisons. There are three of these, with the poles or extremes of each topic described on opposite ends of the lines. For each continuum, read the two descriptions and put a vertical line somewhere along the continuum, depending on which explanation you think more accurately describes the view of people from your culture in general on this issue. Not everyone will take the same view, of course, but try nevertheless to make a generalization about the position of a “typical” person from your culture on this topic.

For example, on the continuum marked Degree of Directness, if you think the description under Direct (left side) more accurately describes your culture's position on this matter, you will put your mark nearer to the left. As you did in the previous continuum exercises, for purposes of marking, think of each continuum as being divided into five segments, starting at the left:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| extreme left | Put your mark here if the text at the left describes your culture very accurately. |
| halfway to the middle | Put your mark here if the text at the left is more or less accurate about your culture. |

The hardest thing to get in Europe is simplicity, people saying what they think and feel, openly and directly. It never happens.

—Stuart Miller
Understanding Europeans

in the middle	Put your mark here if your culture is a true combination of the text at the right and left.
halfway from the middle	Put your mark here if the text on the right is more or less accurate about your culture.
extreme right	Put your mark here if the text at the right describes your culture very accurately.

After you have marked all three continua, you can then use the chart to compare your own culture with your target culture (or cultures) and identify important differences. You can do this in one of two ways:

1. You can give the chart to someone from the target culture and ask him or her to complete it the same way you did, following the instructions given above.
2. You can consult the master list on pages 99-100. This list locates a number of cultures or cultural groupings on the chart.

What do these marks mean? While these are all generalizations and therefore not predictive of what individuals in any given culture might think, each mark represents how the people in that culture in general feel about that item on the continuum. More precisely, the marks indicate

- what the people in that culture think of as natural, normal, right, and good;
- how these people assume everyone feels about these issues; and
- which perspective these people use to interpret and judge the behavior of others (including you).

Where there is a wide gap between your mark and that of someone from the target culture, you can assume that you and that person communicate rather differently. He or she may think your style is quite strange or surprising, and you may think the same about that person's style. And each of you is more likely to misinterpret or misunderstand the messages being sent by the other.

This doesn't mean that the two of you will never understand each other or be able to live or work together success-

fully, but it does mean that you won't start out with a kind of mutual understanding. In other words, each of you will have to make some effort and exercise patience as you try to figure the other person out.

Finally, remember that context determines everything in human interaction. Nothing happens "in general"; things only happen in context, in specific circumstances. And depending on those circumstances, the tendencies of a person toward directness or indirectness may or may not play a role, or at least not a deciding role, in a particular interaction. But those cultural instincts are always there as a potential, waiting for an opportunity to show themselves.

Degree of Directness



Direct

People say what they mean and mean what they say; there is no need to read between the lines; it's best to tell it like it is; people are less likely to imply and more likely to say exactly what they are thinking; yes means yes.

Indirect

People don't always say what they mean or mean exactly what they say; you have to read between the lines; people are more likely to suggest or imply than to come out and say what they think; you can't always tell it like it is (what if that upsets the other person?); yes may mean maybe or even no.

Role of Context



Low Context

People are individualistic; ingroups are not as well developed as they are in high-context cultures and people spend less time in them, hence there are fewer shared experiences and less shared understanding; one has to spell things out and be explicit; words are the primary carriers of meaning; what is said is more important than what is not said.

High Context

People tend to be collectivistic; ingroups are strong and people spend a lot of time together, hence, there are more shared experiences and more common understanding than there are in low-context cultures; there is less need to spell things out; more is implicit; words are not always the primary carriers of meaning; what is not said may be more important than what is.

Importance of Face



Face Less Important

Telling the truth is more important than sparing someone's feelings; honesty is the best policy; it's okay to say no and to confront people; people don't worry much about saving face; getting/giving information efficiently is the primary goal of the communication exchange.

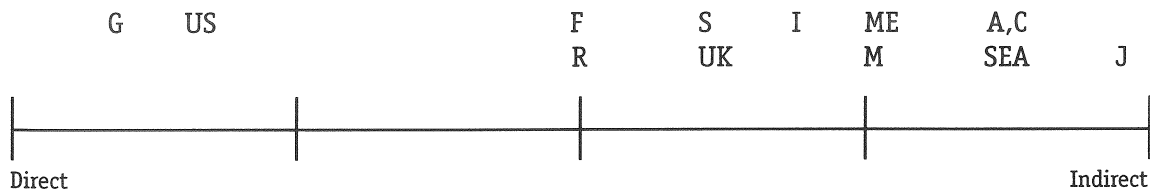
Face More Important

Preserving harmony and saving face are key concerns; the truth, if it threatens harmony or someone's face, should be adjusted; one says what one thinks the other person wants to hear; it's not always proper to say no, disagree, or confront (that disturbs harmony); preserving/strengthening the personal bond is the goal of the communication exchange.

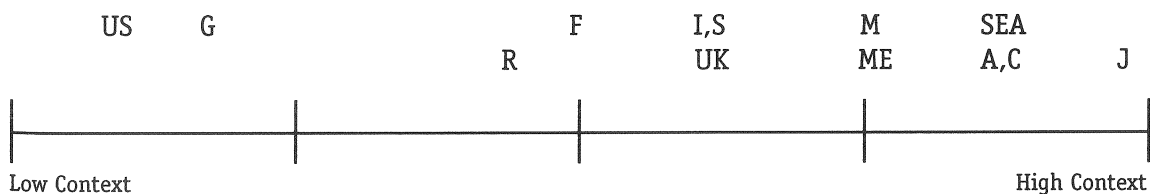
Position of Selected Cultures

A number of cultures or cultural groupings have been selected for inclusion on this chart. The positions given here reflect either where nationals of these countries/regions have consistently placed themselves on this chart in numerous workshops and training seminars given by the author or where the author has placed these cultures after consulting various surveys and studies in the literature of the intercultural field. Remember that these placements are approximations and that they indicate the position of a culture as a whole on these matters, not of individuals. Even then, it's possible the reader may not agree with where his or her culture has been placed or even where other cultures have been placed. The best way to use these continuum charts is not to take our word for any of this but to hand them to a person from another culture and let that individual speak for his or her own society. If any of your target cultures do not appear on this chart, you may be able to infer their position by noting the placement of a similar culture.

Degree of Directness

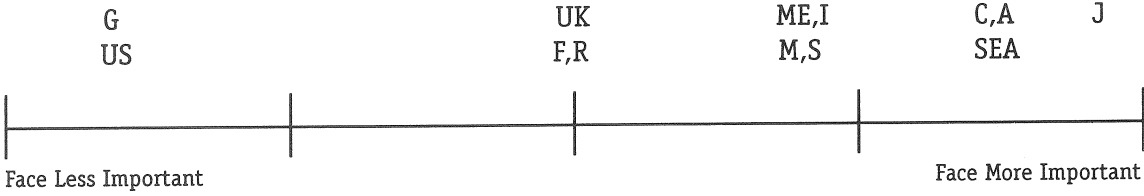


Role of Context



3.3

Importance of Face



A—Africa C—China F—France G—Germany I—India J—Japan
M—Mexico ME—Middle East R—Russia S—Spain
SEA—Southeast Asia UK—United Kingdom US—United States

Communication Techniques

This chart presents a number of common communication techniques and shows how the different meanings attached to these techniques by direct and indirect communicators lead to inevitable misinterpretations and misunderstandings. For each number read the first three columns and then in the last column, on the right, write how you think each type of communicator would interpret the other when he or she uses this technique. The first one has been done for you as an example.

Technique Used by Speaker	Meaning in a Direct Culture	Meaning in an Indirect Culture	Possible Misinterpretations
1. Understatement ("I have one small suggestion.")	Understatements are often taken literally; in this case, the listener would assume the speaker doesn't feel strongly about this matter.	This is the way to express considerable interest in/concern about the matter.	<p><i>A person from a direct culture will think the speaker does not have a strong opinion on the matter.</i></p> <p><i>A person from an indirect culture will think the speaker is very interested or concerned.</i></p>
2. Changing the subject.	The person wants to go on to a new subject.	The person does not want to talk further about the subject now under discussion.	

Khoo Ah Au liked Americans. Above all he found their personal relationships easy to read. His own people were always very careful not to give themselves away, to expose crude feelings about one another. Americans seemed not to care how much was understood by strangers. It was almost as if they enjoyed being transparent.

—Eric Ambler
Passage of Arms

Technique Used by Speaker	Meaning in a Direct Culture	Meaning in an Indirect Culture	Possible Misinterpretations
3. Saying yes.	Agreement, approval, acceptance, understanding.	Mere acknowledgment that the person heard you; being polite and respectful.	
4. Saying nothing in response to a proposal or suggestion.	The person does not object, disagree with, or have a problem with the proposal/suggestion.	The person does not approve or does not think it his or her place to comment and would rather say nothing than criticize (especially if the proposal is made in a group setting).	
5. Telling a story that seems to be off the subject.	The person has lost his or her train of thought, has gotten off track, is not very organized.	The person is trying to make a point indirectly, normally a "difficult" point, such as a criticism, refusal, or something disappointing.	
6. Asking a question about or returning to a point previously agreed upon.	The person has forgotten the previous decision or that this point has already been discussed.	The person did not like the previous decision and wants to change it.	

Technique Used by Speaker	Meaning in a Direct Culture	Meaning in an Indirect Culture	Possible Misinterpretations
7. Asking what <i>you</i> think in response to your asking for an opinion or making a proposal.	The person wants to know your opinion on the matter.	This usually means no.	
8. Informing a superior about something that is going on.	Asking for some kind of intervention or help.	Being respectful to a superior by keeping him/her informed of routine goings-on.	
9. Qualified answers: Probably, I think so, I'm almost sure, There's a good possibility.	They suggest the likelihood that the thing will happen.	The person is not in agreement with or positive about the matter and doesn't want to say so.	
10. Not mentioning something in a conversation (the significance of what is not said).	Not saying something means you have nothing to say, one way or the other, about that topic.	Not mentioning something can be a way of expressing discomfort about or indicating there is a problem with that topic.	
11. Embedded answer: answering an earlier question in a subsequent part of a conversation.	This technique would not be noticed.	Delicate, embarrassing questions are sometimes answered out of context, where the "answer" can be given obliquely.	

Possible Misinterpretations

Remember in reading the following analyses that in those cases where both the speaker (the person using the technique given in the left-hand column) and the listener are the same type of communicator, then they would normally not be misinterpreting each other.

1. Understatement ("I have one small suggestion.")
A person from a direct culture will think the speaker does not have a strong opinion on the matter.
A person from an indirect culture will think the speaker is very interested or concerned.
2. Changing the subject.
A direct communicator may think the speaker has nothing more to say on the present topic or has lost his or her train of thought. The direct communicator might bring the conversation back to this topic if he or she hasn't finished talking about it, thus upsetting the speaker, who is uncomfortable talking about the subject.
An indirect communicator may think the speaker is uncomfortable with the topic under discussion and be reluctant to refer to it again.
3. Saying yes.
A direct communicator will assume the speaker has understood, agreed, approved, accepted whatever is being discussed.
An indirect communicator will assume that yes is simply a polite acknowledgment and look or probe for the real response from the other person.
4. Saying nothing in response to a proposal or suggestion.
A direct communicator assumes the speaker will say something if he or she has a problem with or does not agree with or like the proposal; hence, silence means approval.
An indirect communicator assumes silence means the speaker has some objection to the proposal and will pursue the matter with that person in the appropriate setting.

5. Telling a story that seems to be off the subject.

A direct communicator will assume the speaker has gone off on a tangent or lost his or her train of thought. The direct person will wait for the speaker to finish and get back to the subject, not paying much attention to the story and perhaps missing an important point that is being made indirectly.

Since this is not a technique used by direct communicators, there is no chance of misinterpretation here for an indirect communicator. Direct communicators do tell stories on occasion, of course, and when they do, indirect communicators should be careful not to read anything into such stories, for they are usually told for their own sake and not as a way of commenting indirectly on something else.

6. Asking a question about or returning to a point previously agreed upon.

The direct communicator will think the speaker has forgotten what was said and will simply repeat the gist of the original discussion, when, in fact, the speaker may be trying to reopen the topic in order to get another resolution or decision.

The indirect communicator will think the speaker wants to reopen the discussion when, in fact, the speaker has simply forgotten the original resolution and wants to be reminded of it or reconfirm it.

7. Asking what you think in response to your asking for an opinion or making a proposal.

A direct communicator will assume the speaker wants to know your own opinion on what you have just proposed or suggested and will give it, thus missing the point, which is that the speaker is not especially taken with the suggestion but doesn't want to come right out and say so.

An indirect communicator will assume the speaker doesn't think much of the suggestion and may withdraw or amend it when, in fact, the speaker is simply asking for your opinion.

8. Informing a superior about something that is going on.
Direct communicators may interpret this as a request for a solution or some kind of assistance and offer help where none is needed or wanted by the speaker.
Indirect communicators might interpret such a conversation as a routine update, a common courtesy toward bosses who like to know everything that's going on—and fail to offer help that was, in fact, being requested by the speaker.
9. Qualified answers: Probably, I think so, I'm almost sure, There's a good possibility.
Direct communicators interpret these literally as affirmations, when often they are, in fact, polite ways of saying the opposite of what the words mean.
Indirect communicators hearing these words would take them as polite "nos" when, in fact, they may be meant literally, as near affirmations.
10. Not mentioning something in a conversation (the significance of what is not said).
Direct communicators would read nothing into the failure of a certain topic to come up, assuming there was nothing to be said about it.
Indirect communicators might mistakenly read a message into the speaker's failure to bring up a certain topic.
11. Embedded answer: answering an earlier question in a subsequent part of a conversation.
Direct communicators would normally make no connection between an earlier question and a delayed or buried answer.
Direct communicators would never use such a technique, so there would be no chance for misinterpretation on the part of an indirect communicator.

Switching Styles

This exercise asks direct communicators (Part 1) and indirect communicators (Part 2) to practice each other's style of expression. You should feel free to try both parts if you wish.

Part 1: For Direct Communicators

In this activity, you are being presented with a series of seven statements which are more characteristic of direct communicators. Read each statement and then try to rephrase it in a manner more sensitive to an indirect style of communication, applying what you have learned in this section of the workbook. It's not necessarily true, by the way, that these seven statements would never be uttered by indirect communicators—they might very well be in certain circumstances—but only that they are less typical.

For the purposes of this activity, imagine the setting to be a meeting in a culture (or with people) where maintaining harmony and saving face are very important. The first item has been done for you.

1. I'm not sure that's such a good idea.
Do you think that's a good idea?
Are there any other ideas?
I like most parts of that idea.

2. That's not exactly the point.

Like many Easterners, Indians don't like to say "no" outright. Sometimes the lack of an answer is tantamount to a "no." In other instances, a "yes" without a follow-up is a "no."

—Manoj Joshi
Passport India

3. I think we should...

4. What do you think, Mr. Cato? (Asking people directly sometimes embarrasses them. How can you find out what Mr. Cato thinks without directly asking him?)

5. Those figures are not completely accurate.

6. That's not the way to do that.

7. I don't agree.

In some of the above cases, even the rephrased statements might still cause embarrassment or loss of face, especially if spoken in front of other people in a meeting. Can you think of any other ways of communicating your message?

1. _____

2. _____

Part 2: For Indirect Communicators

In this activity, you are being presented with a series of seven statements which are more characteristic of indirect communicators. Read each statement and then try to rephrase it in a manner more readily understood by direct communicators, applying what you have learned in this section of the workbook. It's not necessarily true, by the way, that these seven statements would never be uttered by direct communicators—they might very well be in the right circumstances—but only that they are less typical.

For the purposes of this activity, imagine the setting to be a meeting in a culture (or with people) where maintaining harmony and saving face are very important. The first item has been done for you.

1. That is a very interesting viewpoint.

I don't completely agree.

We need to talk more about this.

I see things very differently.

2. This proposal deserves further consideration.

3. Your idea might work.

4. We understand your proposal very well.

5. We will try our best.

3.5

6. I heard another story about that project (situation, report, etc.).

7. Can we move on to the next topic?

Suggested Answers

Part 1: For Direct Communicators

1. I'm not sure that's such a good idea.
Do you think that's a good idea?
Are there any other ideas?
I like most parts of that idea.
2. That's not exactly the point.
That's another good point.
We could discuss that point later.
3. I think we should...
What do you think of this idea?
Has anyone thought about doing it this way?
4. What do you think, Mr. Cato? (Asking people directly sometimes embarrasses them. How can you find out what Mr. Cato thinks without directly asking him?)
Have we heard all the opinions?
Are there any other suggestions?
Does anyone else want to speak?
5. Those figures are not completely accurate.
I have some other figures here.
Those figures may be slightly old.
6. That's not the way to do that.
I would do it this way.
Have you ever tried doing it this way?
Has anyone done that a different way?
7. I don't agree.
That's a good idea, but I have another one.
What do you think of this idea?
May I make a small suggestion?

Alternative ways to communicate the messages:

1. Where possible, make your comments to the other person privately, one-on-one, either during a break, after the meeting, or in a brief side conversation.
2. Try to meet with people before a meeting to learn their opinions and make your observations, so you don't have to say these things in public.

Part 2: For Indirect Communicators

1. That is a very interesting viewpoint.
I don't completely agree.
We need to talk more about this.
I see things very differently.
2. This proposal deserves further consideration.
We don't agree with certain features of this proposal.
This proposal needs some work.
3. Your idea might work.
I don't think this idea will work.
We can come up with a better idea.
4. We understand your proposal very well.
We have some concerns about your proposal.
We would like to discuss some changes to your proposal.
5. We will try our best.
This will be difficult under the circumstances.
This is not going to be easy.
I'm not optimistic about this.
6. I heard another story about that project (situation, report, etc.).
I don't agree with everything you said.
That's not completely correct.
7. Can we move on to the next topic?
Let's discuss this later.
We're not ready to talk about this now.
We need to get some advice/more information before we can talk about this.