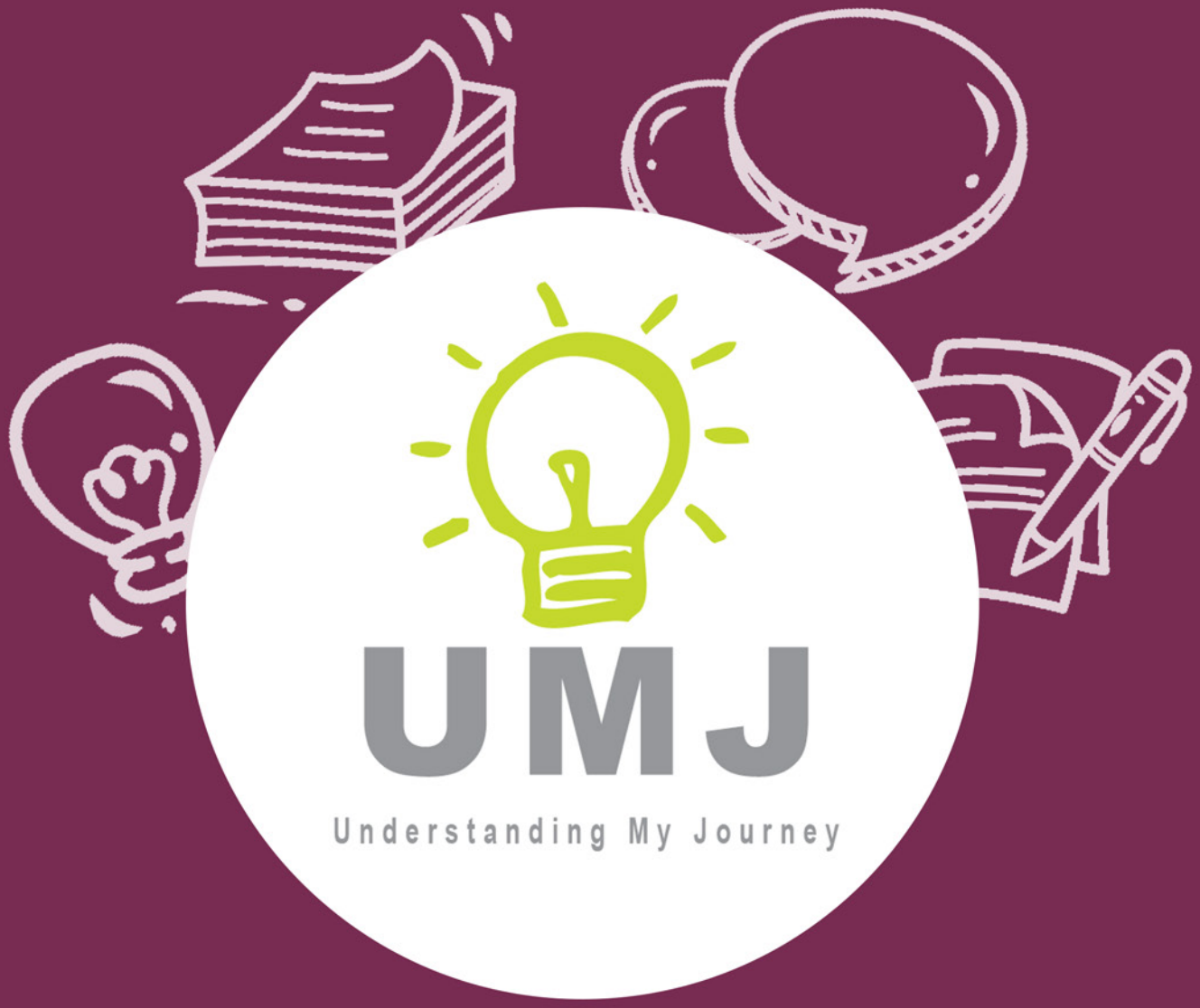

A TOOLKIT
for Soft Skills Development for Young People

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

What they are and why they're important

- Have you ever met someone and immediately decided you liked them?
- What was it that attracted them to you?
- Do you notice that some people have an easy time expressing their ideas?

It's likely that much of what attracted you was the way they communicated with you – how they spoke, the words they used, whether they smiled or not, and the way they looked at you. A person's ability to communicate well with others is seen by many people to be the most important soft skill. However, it's also one of the most difficult to get right.

We all learn how to communicate through our interactions with family, friends and relatives, but this way of communication is not always applicable in every situation. Everyone needs to change the way they communicate depending on the situation they are in. For some people, judging these situations can be difficult, but with the right skills, you can easily navigate these challenges.

How to use this toolkit

You can either use the sections of the toolkit on your own or as part of a group. Your tutor/mentor/ support worker will help decide which approach is better suited to meet your individual needs.

If you have not done so already, then read the 'Introduction and Guidance' section which gives an overview of how to get the best out of your use of the UMJ toolkit.

If you need more space to write down your thoughts or actions then use additional sheets of paper.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Learning Outcomes

In this section, you will:

- Think about how you communicate, and how this influences the way other people see you.
- Think about some different communication skills, and how you might need to change the way you communicate depending on the situation.
- Plot out your own communication skills, and decide how you might need to improve these.
- Identify a situation or task you are involved in, and plan to apply some good communication techniques whilst involved in this.
- Evaluate how your communication skills have developed as a result of this activity, and how you plan to keep on developing your communication skills.
- Evaluate how much you and other people feel understood and connected with each other after the conversation.

Remember! Your skills won't develop overnight. You will need to give some time to work through these activities. Go away and try out your skills, then come back and see how much your skills have improved.

If you need help, ask someone to work through this section with you. This could be a teacher, youth worker, coach, mentor or employment advisor, or someone in a similar role who knows you well.

You're on a journey, and in this stage of the journey, you'll develop some communication skills in some situations you might find yourself in. But first, let's see where you're at before you start this stage of the journey. It's time to take a skills check.

You may find this chart helps you to plan and track your progress through your journey:

Aspect	Date started	Date finished	Your notes
Initial skills check			
Development activities			
Action planning			
Developmental activities			
Reflection, evaluation and 2nd skills check			
Moving on			

BEFORE THE JOURNEY – SKILLS CHECK

Have a look at these examples of poor communication.
What is the problem with each of the situations? What would you do differently in these situations?

When calling your boss to say you are sick:

- *Yeah, I'm not coming in…*
- *What's the matter? How do you feel?*
- *Yeah, I'm not coming in…*

When you're struggling with a new task:

- *I don't know how to use this stupid machine. You have to do it for me. I can't do it.*
- *Why didn't you ask for help before?*
- *Dunno… This is just stupid.*

When deciding what type of restaurant to eat in:

- *I am very hungry. Let's eat something.*
- *Sure. Would you like Chinese or Italian?*
- *I don't care. You choose.*
- *Let's eat pasta then!*
- *I don't like it.*

When a friend is telling you what is upsetting them at the moment:

- *…It was really upsetting, how could he do this to me? I'm not sure I can cope anymore.*
- *Yeah, whatever… oh, hang on… Anyway, what do you want to do tomorrow? Shall we go shopping?*

Look at these pictures.
Are they communicating well or badly? How do you know?

Now, complete the Skills Check.

Step 1:

Indicate the places on the chart which best represents where your skills are at.
You can shade or colour in the grid, or mark with a X and then draw a line to plot out your skills.
You can do this by yourself. If you're not sure how to complete this, ask for help.

		Emerging		Consolidating	Established	
		Never – I struggle with this	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Usually, but not always	Always – no problem!
	Example: *I think through ideas before I speak or communicate*	1	2	3	4	5
1	I think through ideas before I speak or communicate them	1	2	3	4	5
2	I can communicate positively in difficult or challenging situations	1	2	3	4	5
3	I know if what I say has been understood by the person I am speaking to	1	2	3	4	5
4	I know when to use informal or more formal language	1	2	3	4	5
5	I listen openly and attentively to other people during conversations	1	2	3	4	5
6	I am aware of and respect the cultural values of the people that I am communicating with	1	2	3	4	5
7	I pay attention to my body language when in conversation with another person	1	2	3	4	5
8	I know when and how to ask questions	1	2	3	4	5
9	I understand and follow instructions to carry out a specific task	1	2	3	4	5
10	I recognise situations when I need help and know who to ask	1	2	3	4	5

Shade in the box which indicates your overall communication skills level.

Overall, my communication skills are:	Emerging	Consolidating	Established

Emerging = your skills are starting to develop.

Consolidating = you're practicing and developing your skills, but you're not quite there yet.

Established = your skills are well developed, and have become part of how you naturally do things.

Step 2:

Ask someone who knows you well to shade or mark the spaces which best represents where you're at. This could be a teacher, youth worker, mentor or employment advisor, or someone in a similar role who knows you well.
They must not look at your answers!

Peer reflection carried out by:		Emerging		Consolidating		Established
Relationship:		Never – I struggle with this	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Usually, but not always	Always – no problem!
	Example: *Thinks through ideas before they speak or communicate*	1	2	3	4	5
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4	Knows when to use informal or more formal language	1	2	3	4	5
5	Listens openly and attentively to other people during conversations	1	2	3	4	5
6	Is aware of and respects the cultural values of the people that they are communicating with	1	2	3	4	5
7	Pays attention to their body language when in conversation with another person	1	2	3	4	5
8	Knows when and how to ask questions	1	2	3	4	5
9	Understands and follows both instructions to carry out a specific task	1	2	3	4	5
10	Recognises situations when they need help and know who to ask	1	2	3	4	5

Shade in the box which indicates their overall communications skills level.

Overall, their communication skills are:	Emerging	Consolidating	Established

Emerging = your skills are starting to develop.

Consolidating = you're practicing and developing your skills, but you're not quite there yet.

Established = your skills are well developed, and have become part of how you naturally do things.

Step 3:

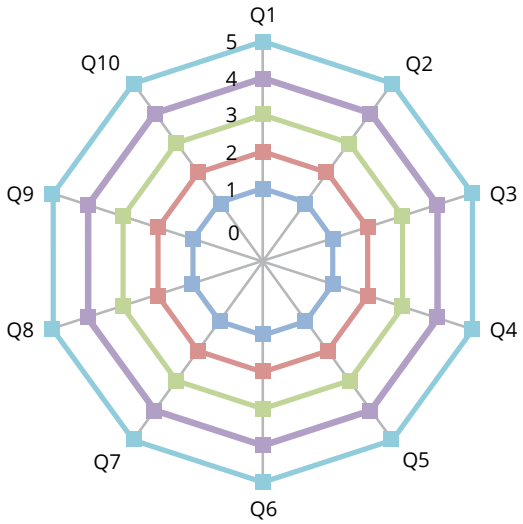
Next, plot your answers on the spider web diagrams below.

Q1 - Q10 represents the questions. On each question, if you answered 5, circle the blue cross. If you answered 4, circle the purple cross. If you answered 3, circle green; 2 circle red; 1 circle dark blue.

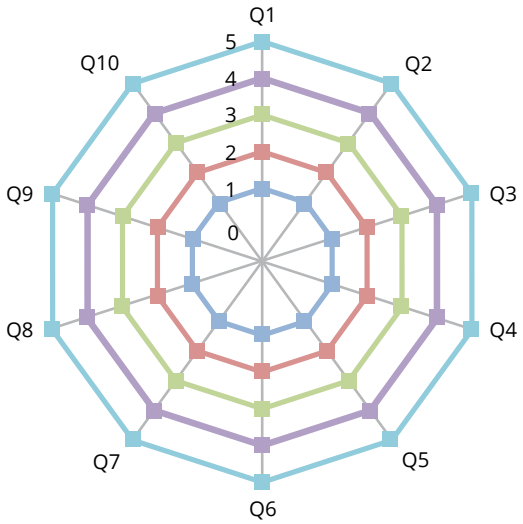
When you have circled all the crosses, right around the web, you should join each cross with a black line. The final diagram should look something like a spider's web and can be lots of different shapes depending on your answers.

If you need more help, look in the **Instructions and Guidance** section for how to do this.

My responses:



The other person's responses:



Discuss your different grids.

- Are your finished diagrams the same or different?
- Do other people see you the same way you see yourself?

Decide together what your strong and weak areas are, and make sure you both agree.
List your strengths and weaknesses below.

What are your three **weakest** areas?	What are your three **strongest** areas?
Area 1:	Area 1:
Area 2:	Area 2:
Area 3:	Area 3:

Your strongest areas might be communication skills you're good at, but you can always improve. Your weakest areas are definitely areas you should think about improving.

Remember that the levels are personal to you and reflect your habits, knowledge and experience and cannot be compared with other people who will have different backgrounds.

YOUR NOTES

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY – DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

You're already on a journey, because you're already involved in some kind of activity or project which means that you have to communicate with other people.

How do you come across?

Much communication is non-verbal, which means that how you position yourself, and how you use your face and body, communicates just as much – if not more than – the things you say.

Are the following people **confident and open**? Or are they **nervous or defensive**?

What about these people?

When would it be appropriate to sit like this?
When would it be inappropriate?

Turn to last page of this section for suggested answers.

Prepare a presentation on any topic you like, for at least 2 minutes. Film yourself on your phone, and watch it back. Only you need to see this!

Think about your body language.
Was your body language:

- Confident, open and engaging?
- Nervous, defensive or uncomfortable?

How could you improve your body language next time? Make some notes here.

Next time I could improve my body language by...

Communication in context – 10 Actions for Effective Communication

When you meet people for the first time it is natural to be nervous. If the setting is an interview for a job or training place it can be really stressful. Here are some communication skills tips which might help.

Action 1: Prepare yourself. This might sound obvious, but it's often overlooked. Make sure you have something to say. For a job interview, research the company or the industry, and know the key facts. Even at a social event where you don't know many people, preparing a few things to say about yourself will mean that you can break the ice more easily.

Action 2: Make a good first impression. In formal situations like interviews, stay calm and introduce yourself with a smile, and a firm (but not excessive) handshake. Make sure that the palms of your hands are dry. Don't bring anything that could distract you, and very importantly, turn your phone off. If you're expected to dress smartly, then do so! Clean your shoes, make sure your hair is neat and that your clothes are appropriate and properly fitting. You can dress professionally and still express your own personal style.

Action 3: Use appropriate body language. When you sit down, sit with your back straight up against the chair or lean slightly forward, with your feet on the floor. This shows interest in the conversation. Keep your hands away from your face and hair, and avoid fidgeting. Keep your arms open, as folded arms can sometimes convey defensiveness. Display some animation with your hands and facial expressions to project a dynamic presence, but be aware that if you do this too much, it could appear unprofessional. Be aware of cultural values, such as the amount of personal space preferred by the other person.

Action 4: Develop active listening skills. Active listeners show that they are listening by using their body language, and they encourage and welcome the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of others. Pay attention to the conversation and avoid looking at the clock, your watch or phone, or showing other signs of disinterest. Smile and nod your head to indicate that you are engaged, but don't force a smile or a laugh. Keep your arms open, and maintain enough eye contact to demonstrate your interest. Active listening also helps the speaker in their thinking, and helps to organise their thoughts.

Action 5: Maintain a two-way interaction. Communication is a two-way process. We're all good at speaking, but how many of us really listen and then respond? In formal situations, allow the speaker to complete each question and statement before responding. Don't interrupt, and make sure that your responses genuinely answer the question. It's fine to pause if you need to think about the right response, because this shows that you have listened and are considering the best answer. Display your curiosity by asking questions – this helps to make a great impression. In more informal settings, take turns in your conversation. Adding in question tags such as 'isn't it?' or 'what do you think?' directly invites the other person to respond.

Action 6: Be clear about what's being said. If you ask questions, it shows that you're interested in finding out more. You could also ask questions to try and clarify anything you don't understand. If what's being said isn't clear, ask the other person to repeat, or ask them if they could rephrase it. Understanding correctly will save a lot of time and can build trust, so don't be afraid to seek clarification if you need to. This also applies to you. In particular, don't say 'yes' when you really mean 'no'. If you need to turn down an offer, do it politely, but firmly and directly.

Action 7: Be concise. As well as being clear on what's said, you should also aim to be concise, especially in formal situations. This is sometimes very difficult if you're nervous. However, long, elaborate sentences don't necessarily make you sound more intelligent. Keep it short and simple. Stick to the topic, and don't go off on a tangent.

Action 8: Speak with confidence. This really comes back to preparing well, but confidence is also about how you use your body language and voice, too. Understand your body language,

and plan in advance how you're going to sit and use your hands. Many people speak faster when they're nervous, so practice slowing your speech down, and pronounce words and sentences clearly. Check the meaning and pronunciation of words you're unsure about. Only speak at length on topics you know about and are comfortable to be questioned on.

Action 9: Be your authentic self: In situations where we don't feel comfortable or don't quite fit in, our response is often to project a personality which isn't how we really are. In formal situations, you can polish up your communication skills and appear professional, yet still allow your authentic self to shine through. How you do this will very much vary from person to person. How do you think you could do this?

Action 10: Communicate appropriately. If you go to a job interview and use the same informal slang you would use with friends, you're unlikely to create a good impression. There's nothing wrong with informal or slang speech, but it's not appropriate in formal situations. Similarly, don't be over-familiar – conversation about your family life or what you did at the weekend are misplaced here – and don't assume you already have the job. Keep a formal distance with your body language and speech. Finally, don't swear, use offensive words, or try and tell jokes. You'll probably be shown the door regardless of how well you communicate otherwise.

Read '10 Actions for Effective Communication' and do the exercise below.

Which of these communication skills are you already good at?

Which of these communication skills will you try for the first time?

What other good communication skills tips can you think of?

YOUR NOTES

ACTION PLANNING

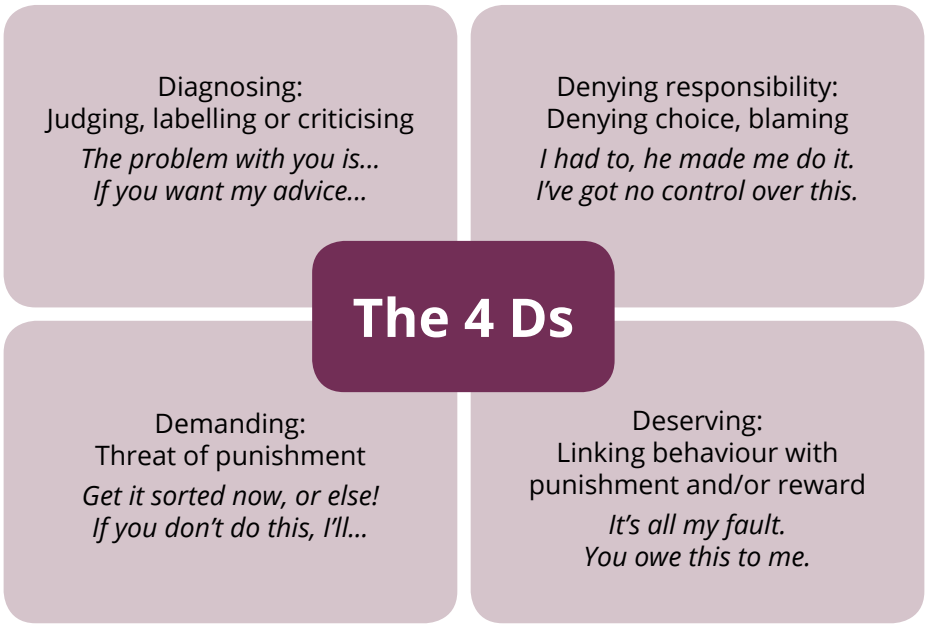
As we go through life, everyone finds themselves in situations which could escalate into a conflict. It's really easy to get into an argument, but much more difficult to get out of one. You have no control over how other people respond to conflict, but you can control how you respond, and how you communicate.

- When was the last time you had an argument with someone? Was it really worth it?
- How much was the result of poor communication on both sides?
- Could you have reacted differently to the situation? Would that have helped solve the problem?

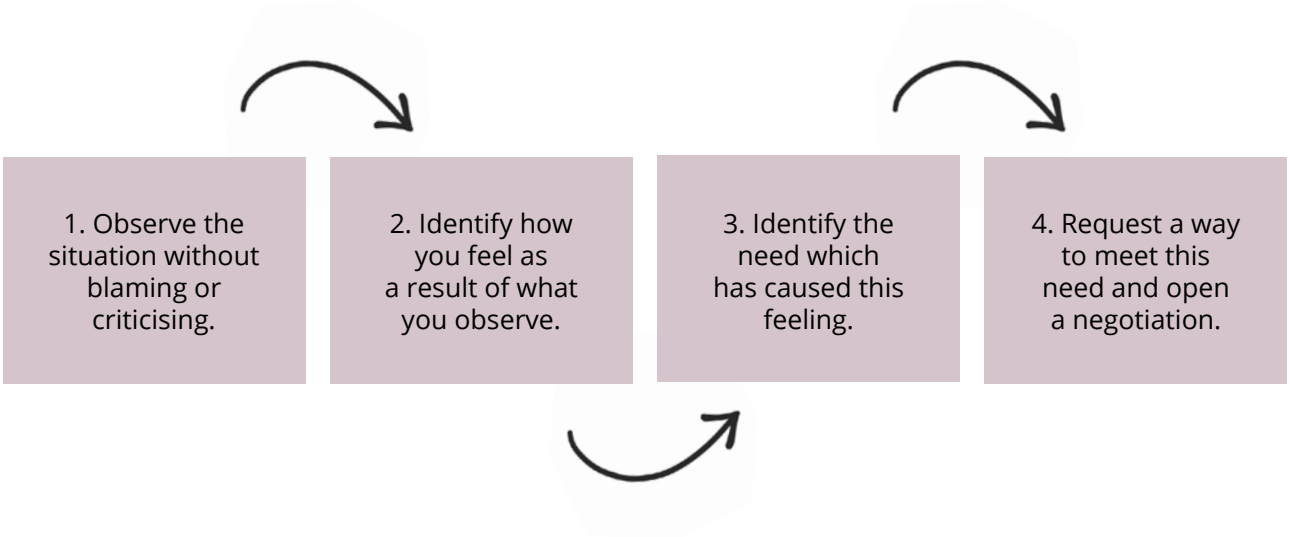
Non-Violent Communication

The Non-Violent Communication (NVC) approach[1] argues that we end up getting into conflict with others because we fail to see that emotions like anger are the result of certain needs not being met, such as the need for acceptance, freedom, being valued, and feeling loved.

The 4 Ds give you some advice on what you should definitely avoid doing. These will escalate the conflict:



Instead of this model, we can try to resolve conflict situations using these 4 steps:



1 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonviolent_Communication

Look at the following example:

1. You're playing your music really loud and I can't sleep.

2. This makes me feel angry and annoyed.

3. I feel angry and annoyed because my need for respect is not met.

4. Would you be willing to turn your music down a little?

Non-violent communication uses the metaphors of the jackal and the giraffe to think about communication:

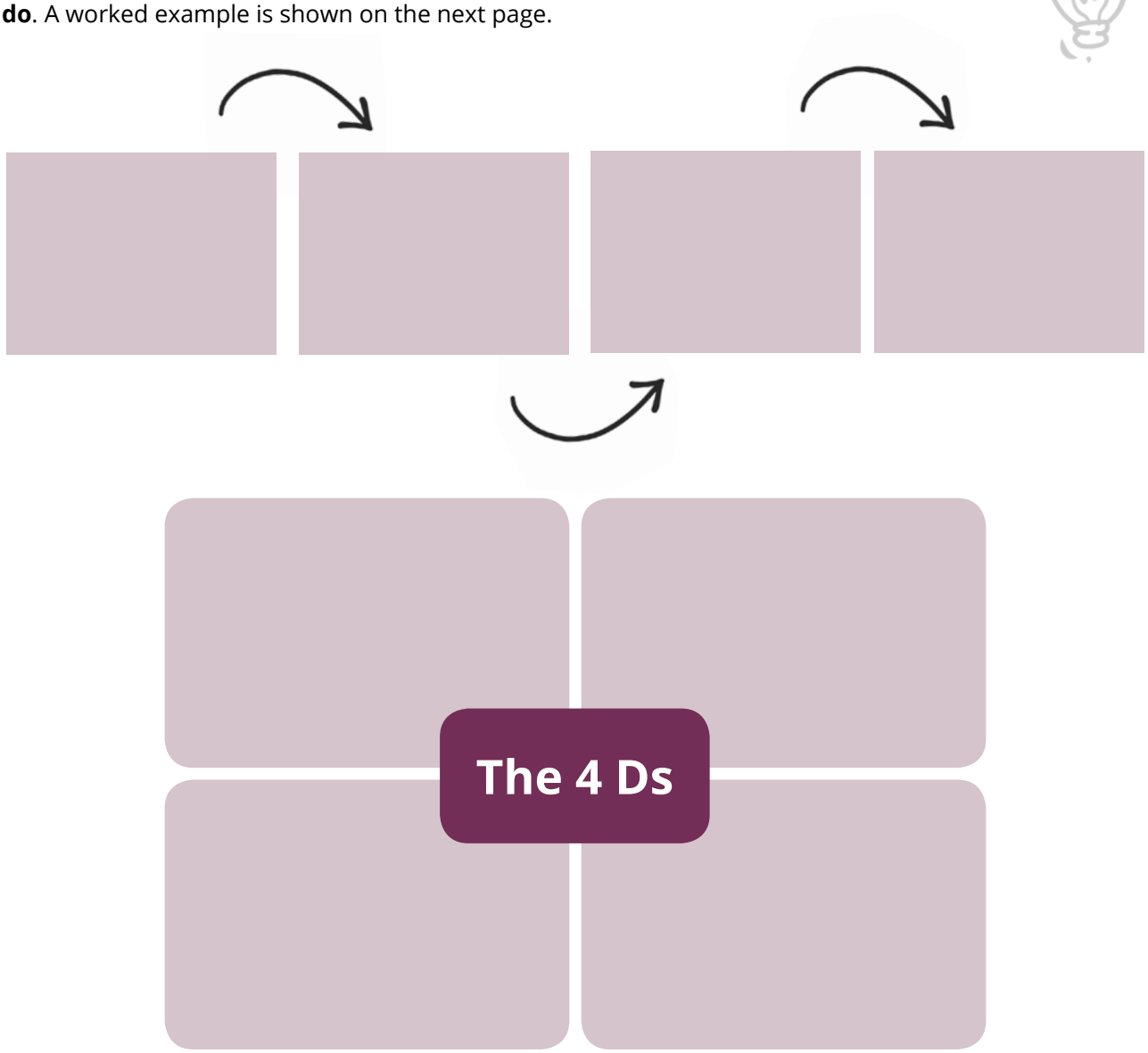
The jackal is a scavenger which attacks by instinct. The jackal uses criticism, punishment and reward, and induces guilt, shame and fear. The jackal sees things as 'either/or' and 'black or white', and sees other people as an enemy. When we hear with jackal ears we hear criticism and blame. We become a helpless victim who blames their own hurt feelings on the actions of others.

The giraffe has the biggest heart of all the land animals. Its long neck makes it vulnerable, but it can also look down on a situation and see it objectively, from above. It is a social animal which values connection, understanding and co-operation. The giraffe is concerned with understanding the needs and feelings of others, and knows that situations are rarely either/or. When we hear with giraffe ears we hear the hurt emotions of others, and our compassionate nature means we want to resolve this hurt. The giraffe takes responsibility for its own thoughts and actions.

Look at Step 3 of the 4 Steps process. Here are some more ways to strengthen your inner giraffe:

I feel	angry annoyed disappointed frustrated impatient lonely nervous overwhelmed sad uncomfortable	because my need for	acceptance appreciation autonomy community creativity love meaning peace respect rest	has not been met.

Think about a challenging conversation or situation you might have to deal with over the next few days or weeks. Use the **4 Steps** and the **4 Ds** to plan what you **will do** and **won't do**. A worked example is shown on the next page.



How did you handle the situation? Were you a jackal or a giraffe? Or a mixture of the two?

Worked example:

My tutor at college has said that I can't take part in a trip because I haven't handed in work on time, and I need to focus on catching up.

1.I have to catch up on work instead of going on a trip.

2. I feel disappointed and annoyed...

3. ...because my need for appreciation and respect have not been met.

4. If I work hard and finish before the trip, can I go?

The 4 Ds

Avoid being judgmental or making criticisms

Don't blame someone else

Don't threaten

Avoid linking to a reward

How did you handle the situation? Were you a jackal or a giraffe? Or a mixture of the two?

The Jackal would have been a helpless victim, only hearing criticism, blame and disrespect. This would escalate the situation meaning that no compromise was possible.

The giraffe is trying to understand the other person's needs. By explaining the additional pressure and suggesting an alternative option, a negotiation process has begun.

REFLECTING AND EVALUATING

How did it go? Here's your chance to reflect on how you've improved your communication skills. Fill in each arrow below with your results and thoughts.

What task/activity did you complete?

Did you follow your own communication skills advice? How?

Can you now communicate better? How?

What new communication skills will you take with you and develop further in the future?

AFTER THE JOURNEY – SKILLS CHECK

You've almost completed this stage of your soft skills journey. You've used this part of the journey to think about your communication skills. Now it's time to see how much distance you have travelled in your communication skills journey. Indicate in the spaces which best represents your skills now.

		Emerging		Consolidating		Established
		Never – I struggle with this	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Usually, but not always	Always – no problem!
	Example: *I think through ideas before I speak or communicate*	1	2	3	4	5
1	I think through ideas before I speak or communicate them	1	2	3	4	5
2	I communicate positively in difficult or challenging situations	1	2	3	4	5
3	I know if what I said has been understood by the person I am speaking to	1	2	3	4	5
4	I know when to use informal or more formal language	1	2	3	4	5
5	I listen openly and attentively to other people during conversations	1	2	3	4	5
6	I am aware of and respect the cultural values of the people that I am communicating with	1	2	3	4	5
7	I pay attention to my body language when in conversation with another person	1	2	3	4	5
8	I know when and how to ask questions	1	2	3	4	5
9	I understand and follow instructions to carry out a specific task	1	2	3	4	5
10	I recognise situations when I need help and know who to ask	1	2	3	4	5

Shade in the box which indicates your overall communication skills level.

Overall, my communication skills are:	Emerging	Consolidating	Established

Emerging = your skills are starting to develop.

Consolidating = you're practicing and developing your skills, but you're not quite there yet.

Established = your skills are well developed, and have become part of how you naturally do things.

Again, ask the same person who knows you well to indicate on the chart the spaces which best represents where you're at now. They must not look at your answers!

Peer reflection carried out by:		Emerging		Consolidating		Established
Relationship:		Never – I struggle with this	Hardly ever	Sometimes	Usually, but not always	Always – no problem!
	Example: *Thinks through ideas before they speak or communicate*	1	2	3	4	5
1	Thinks through ideas before they speak or communicate	1	2	3	4	5
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3	Knows if what they say has been understood by the person they are speaking to	1	2	3	4	5
4	Knows when to use informal or more formal language	1	2	3	4	5
5	Listens openly and attentively to other people during conversations	1	2	3	4	5
6	Is aware of and respects the cultural values of the people that they are communicating with	1	2	3	4	5
7	Pays attention to their body language when in conversation with another person	1	2	3	4	5
8	Knows when and how to ask questions	1	2	3	4	5
9	Understands and follows instructions to carry out a specific task	1	2	3	4	5
10	Recognises situations when they need help and know who to ask	1	2	3	4	5

Shade in the box which indicates his or her overall communications skills level now.

Overall, their communication skills are:	Emerging	Consolidating	Established

Emerging = your skills are starting to develop.

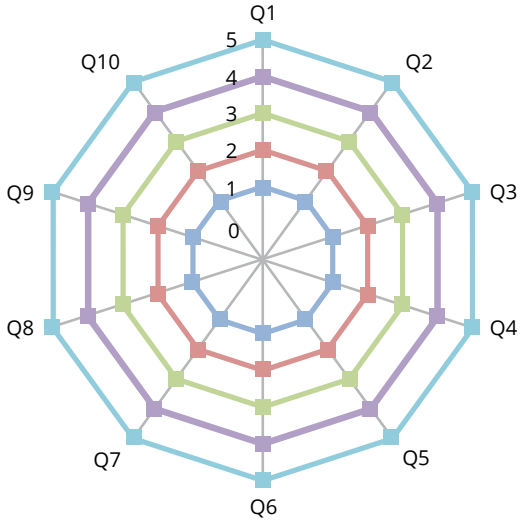
Consolidating = you're practicing and developing your skills, but you're not quite there yet.

Established = your skills are well developed, and have become part of how you naturally do things.

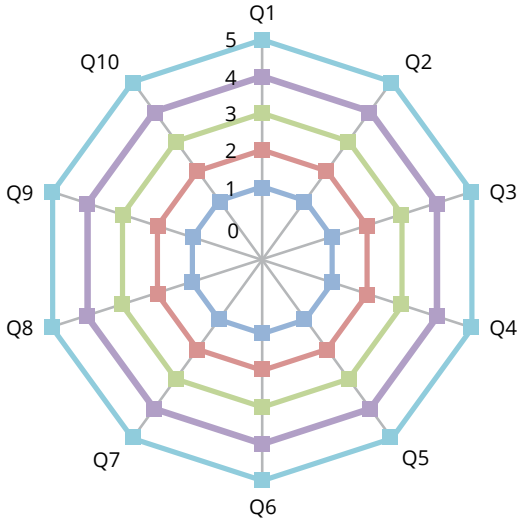
Next, plot your answers on the spider web diagrams below.

If you need more help, look in the **Instructions and Guidance** section for how to do this.

My responses:



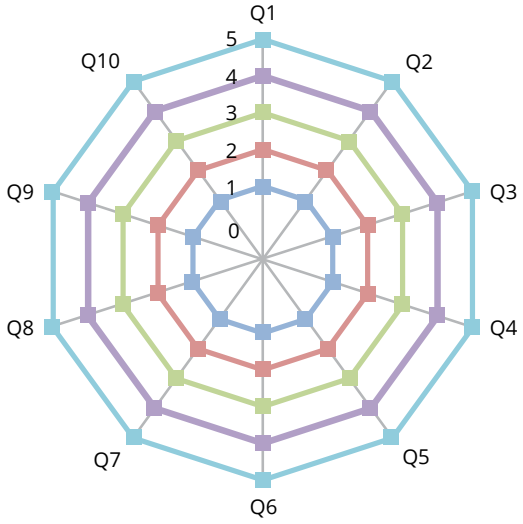
The other person's responses:



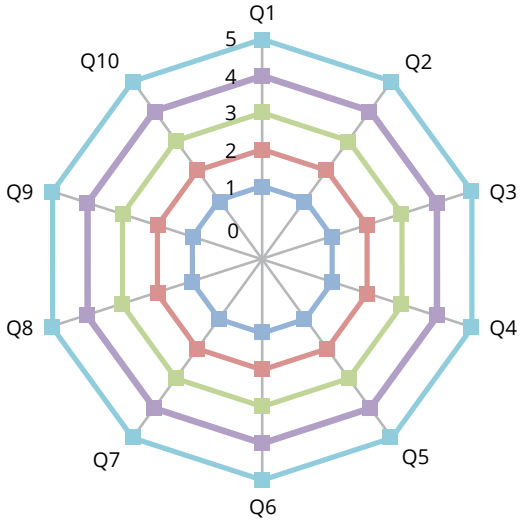
If your spider's webs look the same, that's fine. Go to the next stage.
If they're different, work together to produce a single spider's web you can both agree on.

Plot out two diagrams – your skills before, and your skills now.

My skills before:



My skills now:



Are your 'before' and 'after' diagrams different? How much progress have you made?
If they're the same, don't be disheartened. Sometimes we slip backwards, or we need more time to develop our skills. This is part of the journey!

Remember that the levels are personal to you and reflect your habits, knowledge and experience and cannot be compared with other people who will have different backgrounds.

MOVING ON

This part of the journey is almost over. It's time to prepare for the next stage.

1. How are you going to continue developing your communication skills?

I am going to continue developing my communication skills by:

2. You've applied for a job or training course, and they want to know what experience you have in communicating effectively to a range of different people.

What examples can you now give in your written application?

3. They liked your application, and they want to invite you for an interview.

What further examples of good communication skills should you mention in your interview?
How should you communicate during the interview?

You are now ready to move on to your next skill.

ANSWER SHEET

Arms crossed over the chest and a direct stare indicates defensive and uneasy.	Interrupted eye contact and removing real or imaginary fluff, shows the person disagrees with what has been said.	Looking downwards at the hand and avoiding eye contact indicates insecurity.	Crossed legs and gripping the seat is indicative of insecurity, feeling nervous and lacking confidence.	Arms crossed over the chest and raised shoulders indicates nervous, defensive and un-confident.	Touching the nose indicates the person is uncertain and feels uncomfortable.

Open arms with rounded shoulders shows confident, trustworthy, and active listening.	Hand on hips is an aggressive defensive pose.	Paying full attention with direct eye contact shows confidence and interest.	Legs crossed closes up the body and indicates confident, defensive and liable to challenge.	Open and attentive, ready to take action.	Indicates that the person is listening closely in a professional manner.

This is a very self-confident pose. It would be appropriate to sit like this in an informal setting such as with family or friends.

However it would be regarded as disrespectful in a formal or serious situation such as an interview or a work meeting.

YOUR NOTES