

COMMUNICATION AS AN ART OF LIVING

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF
TALKING WITH EACH OTHER

BERNHARD POERKSEN AND
FRIEDEMANN SCHULZ VON THUN



“This book brings into view the programmatic core of humanistic psychology. Rather than focusing on defects, deficiencies, and pathologies, it recognizes and concentrates on opportunities for personal growth and on human potential. Bernhard Poerksen and Friedemann Schulz von Thun offer communication tools for everyone – paving the way toward better communication and perhaps also to a better life. Fascinating.”

Michael Murphy, *Co-founder of Esalen Institute,
the birthplace of the Human Potential Movement*



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Communication as an Art of Living

How can we listen better to each other? How can we offer criticism without being hurtful? Why do communication recipes never work? In this book, Friedemann Schulz von Thun and Bernhard Poerksen, two prominent representatives of communication psychology and media studies, provide an introduction to modern communication psychology.

Written in dialogic form to be both humorous and serious, this book explores questions around communication and relationships, as well as around communication and the inner self. It presents easy-to-understand and practical communication models that can be adapted for a variety of settings, from coaching and teaching to mediation to consultancy.

Designed to help people communicate more successfully, this engaging book will be useful for therapists, counselors, coaches, and professional groups who want to improve communication for themselves and their teams. It will also be of interest to students of Communication Psychology and Communication Science.

Bernhard Poerksen is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tübingen, Germany. He has a particular research interest in the new media age and has written about systemic thinking. His most recent book publication in English is *Digital Fever: Taming the Big Business of Disinformation* (2022).

Friedemann Schulz von Thun is Professor Emeritus at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He became widely known for his trilogy *Miteinander reden (Let's Talk!)*, which has long been considered a standard work in the field of communication. Since 2007, he has directed the Schulz von Thun Institute for Communication. His bestselling books are among the most widely read works of psychology in the German-speaking countries.



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Communication as an Art of Living

The Philosophy and Practice of Talking with
Each Other

**Bernhard Poerksen and Friedemann
Schulz von Thun**

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Designed cover image: Getty Images © Kubkoo

First published in English 2026

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Published in German by Carl Auer, 2016

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781041196051 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781041195993 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003712503 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003712503

Typeset in Galliard

by codeMantra

For Felix, Maxie, and Samuel



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About this book

Why, ask the psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun and the media studies scholar Bernhard Poerksen, do communication “recipes” never work? What does it mean to be silent? With how many ears do we listen? Why are misunderstandings normal? How can we offer criticism without being hurtful? How can we escape the maelstrom of conflict and polarization? Is communication an art of living?

In this book, Friedemann Schulz von Thun and Bernhard Poerksen, two prominent representatives of their respective fields, provide an introduction to modern communication psychology in dialogic form, humorous and serious, and fascinated by the big questions of human existence, the search for meaning, truth, and happiness in the face of mortality, illness, and death. Models such as the inner team, the communication square, and the values square are presented to an English-speaking audience for the first time. These models and practical tools, suitable for everyday use, have long been a fixture of coaching, mediation, and consultancy in the German-speaking world. They are taught at schools and universities and have provided new insights to millions of people on the path toward successful communication.

This book brings into view the programmatic core of humanistic psychology. Rather than focusing on defects, deficiencies, and pathologies, it recognizes and concentrates on opportunities for personal growth and on human potential. Bernhard Poerksen and Friedemann Schulz von Thun offer communication tools for everyone – paving the way toward better communication and perhaps also to a better life. Fascinating.

Michael Murphy, Co-founder of Esalen Institute, the birthplace of the Human Potential Movement

Praise for the German edition

“An intelligent, easy-to-understand and yet entertaining book by two very smart people.” *Die Zeit* (Germany’s largest weekly)

“This book combines the vitality of oral communication with the precision of writing. It can be read and understood by everyone.” *Deutschlandfunk* (German broadcasting company)

“The authors’ genial insights, their way with words, and their self-irony make reading this book a pleasure.” *Konfliktdynamik* (academic journal)

“In their dialogic book, Friedemann Schulz von Thun and Bernhard Poerksen give a master class on the wide field of communication.” *Die Presse* (Austrian daily)

“The authors refrain from offering ready-made recipes, formulas for happiness, and false promises. Almost incidentally, there emerges one of the most felicitous introductions to modern communication psychology currently available.” *PR-Journal* (public relations trade magazine)

The dialogic principle

A preface by Bernhard Poerksen

Writing is a lonely affair. At least in theory. In the process of writing, it is said that authors are entirely solitary and alone, absorbed in that kind of inner dialogue that Plato called thinking. They retreat to a quiet place where they develop and structure their ideas, construct a storyline, revise and polish their manuscripts, and they only return to the social world once the written text has been published. During the gradual construction of this book, everything was different. From the first sentence to the last, it was born out of conversations and encounters. This book is not the result of a solitary, monologic self-inquiry; rather, it is a documentation and illustration of the dialogic principle. Even during the actual process of writing and thus in the moment of actual withdrawal and inevitable isolation, the voice of the other was constantly present for each of us. In the case of this book, conversation and dialogue were not just tools to clarify and prepare its contents; they are also the genre and the form of presentation that we used to develop, explain, and discuss our thoughts and ideas.

The collaboration with Friedemann Schulz von Thun started many years ago with a letter. Schulz von Thun – this needs to be explained to an English-speaking audience – is an authority in his field and probably the most widely read psychologist in the German-speaking world. His books sell millions of copies and are translated into many languages; surprisingly, however, none of his works are available in English. So how did this book come about? In my capacity as an editor of a series of works on communication theory, I suggested to Friedemann Schulz von Thun that he present the development of his thinking in the form of a short intellectual biography describing his engagement with humanistic psychology and the systemic perspective. For his work combines both paradigms: Sometimes the focus is on the individual, and sometimes it is on the conditions and rules of communication that influence and shape people as individuals and show them enmeshed in a web of impacts. And yet Schulz von Thun always aims to think autonomy and dependence together and, in his capacity as a consultant and coach, to observe and align both inner and outer force fields. It might be productive, I wrote, to explain the development of his ideas and models (the communication square and the values square, the metaphor of the inner team, the situation model, the maxims of

comprehensibility research, the discovery of congruence as an ideal of communication, etc.) based on his personal intellectual development – to write, as it were, an autobiographical history of the theory of modern communication concepts. To me, this seemed interesting for two reasons: First, Friedemann Schulz von Thun had experienced the genesis of humanistic psychology up close. Through his academic teacher in Hamburg, the psychologist Reinhard Tausch, he had come into contact with Carl Rogers. He became friends with the therapist Ruth Cohn, who, as a Jewish student, was forced to leave Berlin in 1933, encountered experiential therapy and Gestalt therapy first in New York and then in Esalen, California, and imported these new forms to Europe by leaving her distinctive mark on them. Second, Friedemann Schulz von Thun, as a kind of Jürgen Habermas of communication practice, has long become one of the most important agenda-setters of modern psychology and communication philosophy. His models and concepts have shaped and changed the thinking about communication in the German-speaking world. They have long been part of the curricula of vocational study programs; they have been taught for decades in schools and private-sector workshops and seminars; and they have been used by consultants, mediators, and, increasingly, psychotherapists too. The publications and trainings offered by his institute, the events and writings of his friends and colleagues have shaped the world of trainers and coaches in a way that few other German-speaking academics have succeeded in doing. His books about general issues in communication psychology and individual areas of practice and application have long become standard works. The (now rather rare) lectures organized by his institute on Hamburg's Rothenbaumchaussee are still attended by hundreds of people who want to experience the octogenarian live and see the author whose drawings, aphorisms, and thoughts inspire their work. In short, Friedemann Schulz von Thun is one of the nation's most widely read academics and the inventor of his own discipline: communication psychology. A star against his will, he rejects the guru role and the relational fetters of admiration and adoration with humor, self-irony, and his characteristic melancholy modesty, in order to meet and interact with people on equal terms.

How to deal with success in a remarkably relaxed, reflective, and reserved way is not the only thing we can learn from Friedemann Schulz von Thun. We can also learn under what conditions academic thinking catches fire. For he developed his ideas not in the ivory tower of the university but through his direct engagement with practical workplace issues and the miscommunications, complications, and complexities of everyday human relationships. His work is a perfect example to show how theory and practice can inspire each other and how productive it can be to nudge yourself to translate your thinking again and again into other aggregate states, to popularize it – and thus supply it with fresh inspirations. Wouldn't it be important, I asked in my first letter, to investigate this stimulating relationship between theory and practice in greater depth and detail in order to illuminate a highly productive cognition mode? Especially at a time when German universities were indulging in

research-intensive self-isolation and hermeticism, wouldn't it encourage young scholars to go their own way and make their work topical and exciting by focusing on its practical application and real-life relevance?

It is not an over-exaggeration to point out that Friedemann Schulz von Thun's approach and practice-oriented research and communication style can also be interpreted programmatically: as evidence of how stimulating the combination of academic scholarship and practical application can be. After all, being forced to be comprehensible, to sharpen your point, and to provide concrete help is a unique challenge that catapults you into a bracing intellectual climate. You no longer claim to be a supposedly omniscient expert or professorial hierarch; instead, you become an empathetic translator of knowledge, an interpreter of your own discipline – with the intention of helping others, gaining a better understanding of yourself and other people, and discussing, defusing, and sometimes even dissolving conflicts. This approach – and that's the important point – also changes you. Engaging with others, presenting to big audiences, finding yourself in a situation that forces you to sharpen your point, taking palpable pleasure in a felicitous turn of phrase – all of this generates its own *knowledge and cognition systemics*, its own inspiration and force field. In this implicitly dialogic constellation, you are suddenly changing the way you think, talk, and write; you are wooing your real or imagined interlocutors; and you are courting listeners and readers whose world and life experiences suddenly take on a presence of their own or become visible in the first place. If we see our own thinking and writing as being part of a larger social conversation about how to lead a different, perhaps better life; if, from the very first sentence, we aim for this kind of conversation, we will engage in a dialogue even in the moment of monologue – and will stand to gain from it ourselves. As the biographical passages in this book make clear, the process of popularization gradually creates a web of conditions that helps you think and invent terms and concepts. It creates a particular pressure to communicate in a precise and yet vivid and gripping manner, allowing intellectual forces to enter into a synergetic process. The dialogic principle creates its own “resonance chamber.” And step by step, through the permanent interplay of abstraction and concretization, of stimulation and reaction, there emerges a distinctive cognition method unknown and unwanted by inward-looking scholarship and science.

In any event, it was this first letter that eventually led to a visit to the Schulz von Thun Institute for Communication in Hamburg. And here, in direct conversation, the idea emerged to co-write a book that would recapitulate intellectual key experiences and milestones of Schulz von Thun's thinking while also charting new directions and demonstrating the importance of communication psychology for how we live our lives – perhaps even its importance as an art of living. We subsequently spent many hours and months talking about the genesis of communication psychology and its practical, real-life application, and we discussed and debated the limits of systemic thinking and the anthropological optimism of a humanistic psychology that firmly believes in human goodness and people's potential for development. There was one afternoon when we argued about whether the birch tree in front of the window, which

at the time was violently shaking in the wind, was merely something we created through language in the sphere of communication – or whether it existed independently of our cognitive consciousness. Will the birch tree still be there when we are gone? Was there even a shared experience that can be meaningfully described by the word “birch”? We also strongly differed on the question of what this problem of cognition and truth, which we had explored through the concrete example of a single tree, meant for successful communication or whether we were engaging in an intellectual glass bead game that was largely irrelevant for the practice of communication.

This way there emerged from our sometimes stern and vehement, sometimes gay and meandering yet always fresh conversations a steadily growing pile of transcripts that eventually grew to some 600 pages – a semi-structured manuscript at best, of which we were convinced that nobody would want to read it, what with the dispute about the birch tree and its perhaps perceptually contingent existence alone running to a total of 17 pages. From these transcripts, we shaped this book over the course of months. We rewrote some passages, tried to refine casual comments and spur-of-the-moment remarks, and experienced quite tangibly and in a very technical and practical sense that the dialogue we committed to paper and edited for publication represented a polyphonic document. It is *one* text by *two* authors striving for the best possible result with an eye to an audience that eludes clear definition. It is a real-life dialogue between its two authors while at the same time trying to be an imaginary dialogue with interested readers.

The printed version now available unfolds as a three-step process. The first section, revolving around the *big questions*, aims to elucidate and explain Friedemann Schulz von Thun’s work. Here, we discuss his models including the communication square, comprehensibility research, the image of the vicious circle, the values square, the metaphor of the inner team, and the ideal of congruence: being true to self and situation. We take a look at the genesis, development, and potential impact of his practical philosophy of communication to show its depth and complexity. The second section is about *concrete questions* of application. Using the examples of management coaching, education, and intercultural communication, we show how the different models can be used for individual and team development, conflict analysis, and solution-oriented reflection – and especially how they can be combined when it comes to tackling specific challenges, entanglements, and misunderstandings. It is here, in the chapter about intercultural communication, that the dispute about the existence of that magical Hamburg birch can be found.

Last but not least, the third and final section is about the *last questions*. We are starting from the insight that each philosophy of communication is based on the assumption that it is possible to talk again one more time – provided one is alive, strong, and healthy enough. We inevitably have to assume this ideal case: that there is a second chance allowing us to talk things over again, to resolve a conflict. Somehow, things will go on, and the communication once begun is basically reversible. However, we also know that at some point, illness, old age, and death will ruin and ultimately destroy the chance of a new