Building Social-Emotional Learning From The Ground Up

The Prosocial ACT Matrix Communication Process for

Engaging All Students

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Each day we learn more about the benefits of mindfulness. Research supports its positive effects on mental health and leading an active and meaningful life.

You can harness mindfulness in action and help your students do the same.

Using the Prosocial ACT Matrix Communication Process will allow you to apply mindful actions and present moment awareness to decrease struggling and improve achievement and productivity. You will be able to accomplish this with a simple diagram and a few words. No kidding.
Unlike other approaches that may require lots of time, reading, downloads or worksheets, the Prosocial Matrix Communication Process will have you up and running the next time you walk into your classroom, meeting, or session.

All you will need to add is the day to day experience that you and your learners share.

Social-Emotional Learning and the Prosocial ACT Matrix

Point of View

According to CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), social and emotional learning is a process by which we come to understand and manage ourselves, learn how to relate to others, establish satisfying relationships, and make wise decisions.

The core skills that SEL targets are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

The Prosocial ACT Matrix Communication Process is designed to introduce an evidenced-based, mindful process to promote mental health for all learners while learning the tools that build social and emotional learning (SEL) from the ground up. It is based on shared values, collaboration, and working together to achieve common goals among staff and students.

Rather than spend a lot of time training everyone in SEL and using valuable planning and prep time, staff need something that is quick to implement and adapt. The ACT Matrix directly relates
to what teachers and others do in the classroom each day and is easily integrated into your daily routine.

For SEL to “work”, it needs to be simple and sustainable. It also needs to be something that validates the experience of the learner. It should also enhance learning and achievement for students so they can go and learn the skills necessary for school and life.

"Getting prosocial" accomplishes this by actually doing SEL.

“The simplest and most natural way to improve social-emotional learning is by having conversations and asking respectful questions. These questions generate interest, engagement, and wanting to learn more”

What is the ACT Matrix?

The ACT Matrix is a simple way of visualizing the cognitive-behavioral approach to values-based behaviors known as Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT). Dr. Kevin Polk developed the matrix as a way of quickly engaging people in a collaborative learning process.

The Matrix is a point of view that gets big results. It is based on research and the science of what works to get individuals and groups moving toward what matters both personally and professionally.

The target of the ACT Matrix is psychological flexibility. The latest research supports promoting psychological flexibility as the cornerstone of psychological health and well being. The Matrix visually represents the core learning processes of ACT so students of all ages can be psychologically flexible and quickly learn what works. The process “loosens up” stuck and struggling learners by empowering them to move toward resilience and persistence in the face of everyday obstacles and challenges.
In schools and classrooms, the matrix has many uses, including mental health interventions, social-emotional learning, and classroom management. It promotes a powerful climate and culture of caring and personal responsibility in any setting.

The Matrix is a Diagram of How Humans Learn

The process of learning starts at the top of the diagram where we take in information from our five senses. What we experience flows down inside of us and becomes our learning history or mental experience. All of this happens in our mind and as develop and use language we get better and better at it as time goes by.
For any learning to take place, we want to be using both our five senses and our minds so we can be aware of what is going on outside of us as well as what is happening inside of us via thoughts, feelings and the never ending feedback of our minds.

At the same time, we engage in actions to move toward important people and things in our lives. We also spend time moving away from uncomfortable experiences like fear, anger, and sadness. Knowing what is going on around us, being aware of what is showing up inside of us, and recognizing, where our actions are leading us, leads to making choices that work.

THE BASIC PROCESS OF THE MATRIX

The matrix is used to invite your learners into a conversation by asking a few simple questions. You fill up the grid with their responses and everyone starts communicating better. It works with individuals and groups of all ages. You can use it anywhere but it is especially useful when a student or adult is feeling stuck. Asking and answering the questions is the way out of feeling stuck and getting moving toward who and what is important.

The Matrix is about Inviting, Connecting, and Collaborating

Educators spend a lot of time in classrooms and schools dealing with problems. High on the list of issues are engaging and motivating students, managing challenging behaviors, curriculum demands, and administrative pressures. These issues can be ongoing and lead to a lot of struggling and wheel spinning. Effective problem solving entails both the art of influencing and the application of well-defined scientific principles.
The Matrix Gets Educators and Learners Moving

The Matrix is for all of us on the front lines working to make a difference. It helps you reduce the struggles, get more done and be more effective. It also assists your learners in doing the same. The Matrix promotes psychological flexibility, which leads to resilience, persistence, and growth in the face of obstacles and difficulties. It allows everyone to “notice what works” to get teachers, educators, specialists, and learners on the same page and moving toward effective learning. Everyone feels empowered to make healthy choices and work together.

More Teaching...More Learning...Less Struggling

The bottom line is that promoting psychological flexibility in schools and classrooms leads to less struggling with what doesn’t work and more creativity, effective instruction and success. Students use the Matrix to develop the creativity and the prosocial skills needed for success in school and life.

The Prosocial Matrix Communication Process Makes a Difference for:

- Improving and Strengthening Classroom Management
- Increasing Student Achievement
- Developing Self-awareness and Self-management skills so learners can become more self-directed over time.
- Increasing social awareness in groups and learning to work together toward common goals.
• Building relationship skills through a process of shared discovery.

• Developing effective decision-making by establishing a workable point of view that is shared among staff, students and administration.

• And Much More!

A Step by Step Guide to Implementing the Matrix

1. Get The Matrix Out For Everyone to See.

You can draw it on a chalkboard, whiteboard or smart board. You can also give everyone a paper copy to fill out.

Matrix for Psychological Flexibility

Senses

Away Moves  Toward Moves

Mind
2. Ask "Who is Important to You?"

Listen carefully and acknowledge the learner's responses. Write them down in the lower right quadrant if the diagram or they can write their own down (Bonus points if you write down who is important to you).

Get curious as they recall their important people. They may also tell you what is important to them. Write that down too. The people and things that are important to them are what motivates them (and us). Thinking about all of this feels good. Everyone can notice how it feels to do this.

Write down who is important to them in the lower right quadrant of the matrix so they can see it.

3. Ask them about "The stuff that shows up shows up inside of you sometimes"

1. On each person’s journey in life, we encounter obstacles like fear, anger, and stress. We don't want them and they show up anyway. Here, you help everyone be mindful of what I call the "yucky stuff".

2. Once you ask about the yucky stuff you may want to give an example. "Sometimes something like fear can show up inside of us. We don't want it and it just shows up. What other kinds of uncomfortable stuff can show up?"

3. So we ask ourselves and our learners what might show up inside of them that they don't want or want to get away from. All of that goes out on the matrix. We simply make a list of yucky thoughts, feelings, and urges that we/they can be aware
of or notice without having to do anything about it.

4. All of this goes in the lower left.

4. Ask. “What Do You Do to Get Away from Your Yucky Stuff?”

1. When yucky stuff shows up, we have an immediate urge to get away from it. We want to lessen the feeling or eliminate the thought or just plain get it out of us. When fear shows up we want to run. When anger makes an appearance we argue or fight. Someone might take out a cellphone to relieve feelings of boredom or anxiety, etc.

2. Everyone seeks relief from their yucky stuff. It can be very useful to seek temporary relief.

3. So we invite others to share about what they do to move away from unwanted yucky stuff inside of them. We write everything down. We are helping them mindful of their actions with their yucky stuff. We are not telling them to be mindful. They just are. They are learning how to talk and be mindful of the yucky stuff and what they do to move away from it.

4. Away moves from yuck stuff go in upper left.
5. We complete our mindful loop around the matrix by asking "What do you want to do to keep moving toward Who and What is Important to You?"

You want to keep it simple. I like to give everyone credit for doing something important already, namely, showing up and doing the matrix with me!

As we have been doing, we write the things people want to do to keep moving down. We want them to be mindfully aware of actions like talking to a friend, calling a parent, taking their dog out to play, listening to the teacher, etc.
These actions toward who and what is important go in the upper right.

Congratulations! You and your learners have just experienced your first matrix.

- You have been noticing about who and what is important, noticing about the yucky stuff that may be showing up and getting in the way, noticing what is done to move away from yucky stuff and noticing what can be done to keep moving toward who and what is important.

- They can also notice that toward moves usually lead to feeling satisfied (they obtain or achieve something) while away moves are done to seek relief from what we don't
Both toward and away moves are necessary. We need to be able to do both. Noticing helps learners be aware of what they are doing and saying and where their actions are leading them.

6. Noticing Your Big Picture Leads to Psychological Flexibility!

It is what allows learners and everyone else to continue toward the people and things that matter. You can keep moving toward even when the going gets tough and we feel like throwing in the towel or running for the hills. Psychological flexibility gets us out the door on when we want to stay in bed, speaking when we are anxious, or helping a student complete a difficult assignment or manage herself when she is upset of frustrated. In other words, without it we would lead a very boring and unsuccessful life!

*Psychological flexibility is the ability to notice what you are doing and experiencing and choosing what works to get you where you want to go, even in the presence of obstacles.*

The Big Question That Pulls it All Together!

IS WHAT I'M DOING WORKING?

IS IT HELPING ME TO MOVE TOWARD THE Who and What is Important to ME?

IS IT GETTING ME WHERE I WANT TO GO?

The Prosocial Matrix is really a model of *Workability.*
When individuals and groups are noticing workability, they are looking for actions that work to move them toward their individual and group goals.

Workability does not deal with judgements about right and wrong or being correct. It has to do with being able to notice one's actions and the consequences that follow.

When individuals and groups adopt the workability perspective, they are in a better position to predict and control their own behavior. They learn what works to get them where they really want to go.

Perspective taking is critical to developing a solid sense of self, empathy and problem solving. The Prosocial matrix shifts perspectives so that students and at times staff that struggle can see where they actions are taking them and then choose action that work.
THE REAL PROBLEM IS WHAT GETS IN THE WAY: THE STRUGGLE WITH YUCKY STUFF!

Students and others who struggle get stuck a lot. This could happen to anyone who isn't doing some noticing. They get stuck in their heads and then in their behaviors. Since they are less aware of their actions, they tend to do more things to move away than toward. They get trapped in rigid rules and unworkable agendas. They do less of what matters to them, get off track, and often give up.

You can use the prosocial matrix to invite them to notice, to be aware. They get better at noticing their actions and where their actions take them. They learn to choose different actions and experience the results. They learn to make smart choices.

7. The Next Step is to Show Them How We All Get Stuck

Struggling and Unworkable Attempts at Change

• When yucky stuff shows up, we have an immediate urge to get rid of it. We want to control or lessen unwanted thoughts and feelings.
• So You can ask your learners, when you stare ( or text or distract yourself ) to move away from boredom, does your boredom go away?

• They may get some relief, but boredom eventually returns.

• So does all of the other yucky stuff. You just can't get rid of it.
• When we keep trying to avoid and escape yucky stuff, we get into loops. The more we don't want the yucky stuff, the more we get it!

• We can get so caught up in away loops that we can get stuck.

• When we are stuck, we have less energy to go on and do things that moves us toward our important stuff.

• Being stuck feels crappy and bogs you down.

• Everybody get stuck sometimes. It is part of being human.

How to Reclaim Students When They Get Stuck

Resistant and Reluctant Learners can be brought into the fold. They are skittish and at times prickly but with a gentle hand and a welcome, non-judgemental stance they can learn to work with you rather than against you and their own best interests.

The first steps involve introducing an engaging, flexible, nonjudgemental point of view. You just did that when you showed them the matrix! You can do this individually or in the context of the
classroom with everyone since everyone can participate and benefit. You can also do this individually or anytime a little psychological flexibility is needed.

There is no coercion or force used. Students quickly learn they have a choice and that leads naturally to less resistance and more cooperation.

Letting go of judgements and discussions of right and wrong allows you and your students to take full advantage of the natural human instinct to connect. They will work with you rather than against you. Even the reluctant ones.

Since the matrix is for everyone, troubled learners are not singled out but instead participants in a process **they choose to be a part of** with no harmful side effects, conditions or consequences. Collaboration evolves easily and naturally.

The group models connection and cooperation in real time. This creates a highly rewarding, prosocial environment that feels good. They will want more.

**8. Noticing is the Way Out of Stuck Loops!**

It is an active process that is done **for the purpose of moving toward who and what is important.**

So you inviting your learners to notice and showing them the diagram leads them to be more psychologically flexible wherever they are at.
With noticing they move from doing things automatically to having choices.

Having choices feels a whole lot different than feeling things are being done to you.

“Noticing" Homework..the best homework you will ever give or receive!

Once you have the shown everyone the mindful matrix point of view, you are ready to help them extend mindful moments throughout their day and experiences....

1. You say, "Hey, here is some homework for you!"

2. Wait for the groans and rolled eyeballs and then say, "But wait, this is the best homework I will ever give you. You can either do this homework or not do this homework. Either way is fine."

3. You will continue, "If you get the chance, just notice what you are doing and whether it feels like a toward move, moving you toward someone or something important to you, or whether it feels like an away move, you are doing it to move away from yucky stuff showing up inside of you. We can talk later about what you noticed."

4. You can then add, "And guess what, I will give myself the same homework. We can all be noticing our toward and away moves together"

5. So if you are teaching, you could say " I am teaching math and it feels like a toward move". A learner could say " I am
noticing that we are all following directions". They can also notice away moves like someone arguing or the class taking a break.

6. Just notice without labeling things good or bad, right or wrong. You are practicing being in the present moment with whatever we are noticing.

7. Every time learners are able to notice, they are building their psychological flexibility muscles!

What if they Don’t Do the Homework?
Remember, they can either choose to do the homework or not! So they may just not do it!

1. Not doing homework is not a problem with the prosocial matrix work.

2. You will simply say something like, "Cool! You just noticed you didn't do the homework".

3. Now you can ask, "What did you do instead?".

4. However they respond, you can then invite them to put that on the matrix as something that felt like a toward or away experience for them.

5. Either way, you continue to invite them to notice experiences
You Are Doing Noticing In The Service Of Helping Everyone Move Toward Who And What Is Important To Them.

Noticing Brings You Into the Present Moment. The Present Moment is a Great Place to Make Choices that Work!

You Are Now Ready to Help Yourself and Your Learners Make Wise Decisions with the Prosocial Matrix for Groups

Once everyone has experienced the matrix point of view and how it works, you can use the next four steps of the prosocial matrix to ramp up mindfulness and help your class or group become an empowered, high performing team.

Get the Prosocial Group Matrix Up and In Front of Your Group.

1. The Prosocial Matrix is the second loop around the matrix (I will explain later). This is the matrix for the group.

2. A group is two or more people. It could be you and your student, a study group, a whole class, or a meeting.
3. The members of the group will use the noticing skills from the first loop to get everyone pulling together.

9. Now you will ask your group, "What is Our Shared Purpose?"

1. This is the most important question for groups. Here you and your learners will be sharing why you have come and what you are here to do.

2. This is a conversation that you can have many times.
3. There may be more than one purpose and it helps to get everyone on the same page.

4. The conversation can also include "How do I want to be treated?" and "How do we want to treat others?".

5. Again we will be writing responses onto the matrix.

10. The next question is "What yucky stuff can show up inside members of our group/class and get in the way of moving toward our shared purpose?"

This will be similar to the first loop. Any manner of yucky thoughts, feelings and urges (like competitiveness, jealousy, misunderstanding, conflict, etc.) can show up inside of people and bog the group down. Getting these things out in the open and onto the matrix helps the group to realize that you and they all experience the same frustrations. Doing this will lessen the impact of the yucky stuff.

11. Then the group can identify things they or others might say or do to move away from the yucky stuff.

1. Just like yucky stuff in the first loop, everyone does things to move away from what they don't want. This may or may not be a problem. In either case we simply list the things that we could see or hear people do to move away from the yucky stuff.
2. Here you will get responses like arguing, not doing enough, gossiping, leaving early, letting someone else do it.

3. This could also be a conversation about past experiences they or others have had in different groups they have been a part of.

4. The group is learning to identify obstacles to the group successfully moving toward the shared purposes they identified at the start.

5. All of this will go in the upper left quadrant of the matrix.

12. We complete the second loop by asking the question "What can we do to keep moving toward our shared purposes?"

1. Here you will be looking for actions that you and the group will take to move toward the shared purposes you have discussed below.

2. You want to keep it simple and everyone is encouraged to share.

3. Here the group brainstorms. All ideas are welcome. We are generating tasks and solutions for our shared
purposes. Since they have come this far they are invested in the outcome and more willing to take on the tasks that will help complete the mission.

4. Since everyone has a voice there is powerful buy-in and group members want to contribute and be a part of the group.

The Second Loop around the Matrix allows the group to create a shared space to learn and grow together. They discover for themselves how to be a team.

You have now completed two loops around the matrix. You have established a powerful way of collaborating with your learners and together you can go on and discover what works to keep you moving.

The Importance of Two Loops Around the Matrix

The first loop around the matrix is to promote psychological flexibility. Psychological Flexibility is the process of noticing what we are doing, what our minds are up to and what will work to get us where we want to go, even when the yucky stuff shows up.

Psychological flexibility is the cornerstone of mental health and well being. We add noticing to ramp up psychological flexibility. The more we notice what is going on outside of us and inside of us, the better we are at living and learning.
The second loop is for **psychological safety**. Psychological safety is the feeling that people "have my back" in this group. It is safe to share,. My opinion counts and I can contribute.

Psychological safety is what allows us to connect with others and want to learn. Without it we are mistrustful and less willing to be involved.

**The matrix targets both psychological flexibility and safety.** When teachers and students feel flexible and safe in classrooms and schools, learning takes off and groups can achieve great things. The group becomes a source of satisfaction and everyone wants to get on board and do their share.

**13. Take Psychological Flexibility to the Next Level with Sorting.**

Sorting is as easy as it gets. All you need to do is sort your experiences and those of your learners into the Prosocial Matrix.

For sorting, all you need to do is take whatever someone does or says and sort it into the matrix diagram. The question is, “Where does what you are doing or saying go up here on the diagram? Where would you put it?”
You ask the question with interest and curiosity. You are not being sarcastic and you really want them to tell you.

Asking the question influences them to pause and choose.

You want them to pause and choose so they can remind themselves their reasons for what they are doing and being mindful about who and what is important.

**THEY do the the sorting.** We don't sort for them. We want them to see and feel from their “Observer Self”, big picture point of view.

There is no right or wrong with sorting. It is not important where they put it. What is important is that they sort!

They are sorting for mindfulness and psychological flexibility. When they are mindful and flexible it will feel good and they will want to do more.

Feel free to sort your experiences as well as model how to use it and to maintain your own flexibility.

**Keep the matrix visible. It is your mindfulness and sorting cheat sheet!**

1. Refer to the diagram anytime. It is especially helpful if someone is struggling. You can go to the matrix and say, "Hold on everybody, let's take a look at what we're doing. Are we over here on the toward side or or over here on the away side?"

2. Give them credit for whatever they notice.
3. You can also ask, "Are we doing things to move toward what is important to our group?" "Is there something else we could be doing or changing that might work better?"

4. Look for opportunities to sort your experiences throughout the day.

THE ACT Matrix Guide is available in March 2020!

It is a laminated guide designed for use in classrooms, schools and organizations. It is available through National Professional Resources Inc. on line:

The ACT Matrix: A Mindful Process for SEL, Mental Health, Collaboration, and Achievement

https://www.nprinc.com/the-act-matrix/
In education, the Prosocial Matrix approach is a highly effective means of promoting social/emotional learning, self-monitoring and self-direction in learners of all ages and is appropriate for regular and special education populations. It is also a great inservice training or workshop for staff and can be tailored to specific subjects like stress management, conflict resolution, team planning, etc.

My goal is to get the Matrix into the hands of as many educators and learners as possible. I am offering full and half day workshops for professional staff, parents and students beginning March 2020. The workshops are conducted in your school, district and organization and follow up training and support can be arranged. I am available for consultation as well. You can contact me at: philtenalgia@evolvingsolutions.co for details.

I have developed a training site for schools, businesses and other organizations. It is for professionals and anyone else interested in making a difference for themselves and those they serve. You can learn more at evolvingsolutions.co
Phil Tenaglia Youtube Channel

At Evolving Solutions a free training video series is available with follow up information on how you can take the matrix journey further. This training also puts you on my mailing list for webinars, announcements and more.

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Resources


The Matrix For Education Starter Manual: Developing Psychological Flexibility For Learners, Educators and Parents
available through “Matrix Goes To School” website (free download) philtenaglia.com

Additional Resources

The ACT Matrix Academy : website of Dr. Polk

“The Art of Being with the ACT Matrix Podcast” with Dr. Kevin Polk and Phil Tenaglia ( Itunes, Soundcloud, Google Podcast, Stitcher, Spotify ).


Kashdan, T., & Rottenberg, J. (2010). Psychological flexibility as a fundamental aspect of health Clinical Psychology Review, 30 (7), 865-878 DOI: 10.1016/j.cpr.2010.03.001


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Your learners will pick up the flexibility of the matrix and want to use it for lots of different things. As you use it, you and your learners will discover other ways it can help and will use it in other places and show it to others. You and your students will experience a strong sense of psychological safety and will naturally want to contribute and feel a sense of satisfaction in working together toward collaborative goals. This evolves from ongoing conversations about the shared purposes and what might be showing up and getting in the way. Your classes and groups will be happier and healthier with less stress. And...you can use it with your colleagues and anyone else that is important to you!