Lost in Instruction



How to turn what you mean into what people actually do.

TIMEA PAPP

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Original Hungarian title: Mindenki instruál

First English edition, 2026

www.timeapapp.com

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1. Introduction: Why This Book Was Born

Some things are such a natural part of our lives that for a long time we don't even notice how deeply they run through our days. We simply do them. That is how it was for me with giving instructions.

Instruction has been part of my life since I was very small. I received instructions, later I gave them, and all the while I became more and more curious about what actually happens between two people in this process. How does a sentence, an emphasis, a look or a gesture affect us? Why do we understand some things instantly? And why does it happen that we explain something several times, yet the other person still doesn't carry out what we had imagined?

When I was a child, my mother accompanied practically my whole day with instructions. How to sit, how to stand, how to wash the dishes, how to close the window, how to step onto the rug, not to touch the wall, to lift my foot, then put it down. Many people who grew up with the parenting culture of the 1970s and 1980s will recognize this world. Instructions could arrive as words, as a look, as a gesture, as impatience or anger, and sometimes as harsher physical signals too. Who doesn't remember the bunch of keys flying across the classroom in math class when someone's attention had drifted?

Later I met the same thing from a completely different side. During my four years at the Secondary School of Arts in Pécs, I experienced how much power a precisely worded and well-timed instruction can have. A teacher teaches with words, images, rhythm, demonstration and their own presence. When all of this works well, an almost miraculous transformation can take place. In four years they turned us into dancers we could never have imagined ourselves becoming. We received knowledge, body awareness, discipline and artistic sensitivity, and along the way I experienced how much consistent, precise professional attention can change a person.

The next important stage was the dance teacher training program of the Rotterdam Dance Academy, which is now part of Codarts. There I began to examine, from a teacher's point of view, everything I had previously experienced as a student and as a dancer.

One of the central questions of teaching methodology was how a task becomes understandable and doable: how we break it into steps, how we phrase it, demonstrate it, correct it, and how we guide the learner through the whole process. This was when I began to recognize more consciously that giving instructions is a professional tool in its own right, one that can be learned and developed. From then on, I deliberately observed and studied this process in my own work as well.

As a professional dancer, and later as a choreographer and movement coach, I moved to the side that gives instructions. My starting point became the body: movement, rhythm, space, timing and the special connection that forms between the person giving an instruction and the person receiving it.

Dance is a very precise field for this. Often you have to put into words tiny, almost invisible details. A dancer can work for years on perfecting a passé, an axis, a jump or a turn. In these cases the instruction becomes more and more refined. Where should the weight be? Where should the attention go? When should the movement begin? With how much force? What breath should accompany or initiate it? On top of the physical layer there is an emotional layer and a layer of quality: what the body should do, what state it should start from, and what of all this should reach the audience or the partner.

To put it very simply, one of the basic tasks of my work is to help someone get from point A to point B. To do that, I first need to understand where they are starting from, what they are capable of in that moment, what is holding them back, and what instruction can bring them closer to the next step.

Over time I sensed more and more strongly that the same sentence can trigger completely different reactions in different people. Some people understand precise, matter-of-fact wording. Others understand images, rhythm or metaphors. Others need to be shown the task, or need to experience it in their own body. Some people open up with encouragement. For others, a firmer voice helps them focus. We all interpret what we hear through our own experiences, upbringing, cultural background and personal associations.

This is why I became more and more interested in the process itself. I watched when an instruction helps, when it gives safety and focus, how it can set someone free, and under what circumstances fear, resistance or shutting down appear. I also studied how a single well-chosen sentence can make a movement more precise, and when I need to look for a completely different language to reach the same goal.

Over the years I have had the chance to work with an extraordinary range of people. I have taught children and adults, amateurs and professional dancers, actors, singers, extras, graphic designers, technical crews, stage technicians and large groups. In Los Angeles I worked with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and in Hungary with children with Down syndrome. In China I taught very wealthy women who spoke no English, in the Netherlands amateur adults came to my classes, and back home in Hungary I taught, among others, ballet students and future dance teachers at the Hungarian Dance University.

The same method never worked the same way in any of these situations.

On *America's Got Talent* I worked with American professional dancers. On *The X Factor* I also worked with contestants who had little or no experience of theater, television or live shows. In just a few weeks we had to build their stage presence so that they could stand on stage confidently, composed, and making a professional impression. I have also worked with international stars with whom we sometimes understood each other after half a word.

One of my favorite challenges came on an international film production, where I instructed members of a local community as extras. None of them had ever been on a film set before; the world of acting was completely unknown to them. The scene called for a very strong yet restrained inner intensity, and my instructions reached them in two languages, through interpreters. It became especially important to find a way to convey a complex inner state simply, precisely and in a way they could genuinely feel.

In a completely different situation, in Shanghai, I tried to explain my complaint to a blind masseur, only to discover that he didn't speak English either. What remained was touch, guiding his hand, sounds and volume. From these we had to build a shared system of signals for what felt good and where the injured area began. I sometimes wonder what the two of us must have looked like from the outside. For me, it became one of the most memorable hours I have ever spent.

I have worked with teams of several hundred people, and in a flash mob at the Sziget Festival in Budapest with around three thousand. Every one of these situations asked me the same question in a new form: how do I find the shared language through which an intention reaches the other person and, in the end, turns into action?

Somewhere in the middle of my life, I suddenly began to look at all of this from the outside. That was when I understood that over the years, almost without noticing, I had built a huge catalog of experience about giving instructions. For a long time I saw these as separate experiences. A dance class. A film shoot. A rehearsal. An event with thousands of people. Teaching a child. A communication situation in Shanghai. When I placed them side by side, a shared system emerged among them.

Throughout my career I have been able to work with many outstanding teachers, choreographers, directors and other professionals. It was fascinating to see how many different tools they used to lead people and create results. Some of them handled instruction almost like magicians. They sensed exactly when to speak and when a look or a gesture was enough. When emphasis matters. Silence. Energy. Or simply the way they enter a situation and create attention. Among film directors, too, I met people who led the entire process with remarkable awareness. Beyond their words, what mattered was how they watched, reacted and gave direction to the whole team.

Of course, I have also seen counterexamples. Excellent professionals with a strong vision and precise expertise, for whom passing on that vision was nevertheless harder. You can learn a great deal from these situations too. They show how easily information can be lost between the idea and its realization. And how much depends on the way an intention travels from one person to another.

This is where the central question of this book was born:

> **How does an intention travel from one person's mind to another person's action with as little loss of information as possible?**

Dance and movement are my starting point, but instruction reaches far beyond this world. It appears in education, sport, the arts, leadership, creative work, the family and almost every situation in which one person wants to convey their intention to another. Instructions are born on a film set, in a corporate project, on a sports field, on a construction site, in a rehearsal studio, in a brief or in an email.

That is why I wrote this book for everyone who works with people, teaches, leads, creates, assigns tasks, gives feedback, collaborates with others, or simply wants to express more precisely what they would like from another person. It is also for those who assign tasks in writing or communicate in digital environments.

The focus of this book is instruction between people. Prompting artificial intelligence raises related questions, but it is a system with a different logic that deserves its own discussion. Teaching, training and handling animals is likewise a methodological field of its own. The chapters that follow therefore concentrate on how one person's intention reaches another person's understanding and action.

I want to share what I have learned over the years because I believe it helps all of us to bring a little order to how we think about this process. If we can see what happens from the moment an intention is born in us until the moment it becomes another person's action, we can communicate more consciously. We can ask, teach, lead and work together more precisely.

With this book, I would like to offer some practical guidance for that. I want to pass on my own experiences, the observations I have gathered over many years and the professional knowledge connected to them in a way that lets readers recognize their own situations in them. So that they understand better what makes an instruction work, where information can get lost, how it can be corrected, and how to find the form that truly reaches the other person.

Perhaps this is the most exciting part of it: in every single instruction there is a small opportunity for two people to understand each other more precisely, and for something real to come into being as a result.

2. Instruction as a Bridge

Giving instructions is a special, directed form of communication. Its purpose is to make a thought, image, intention or wish that exists in one person's mind understandable and doable for another person. We work with words, images, sounds, signals and examples from which the other person can build their own inner picture and direction of action. An instruction usually gives direction, while questions, feedback and dialogue help it get across precisely.

When we give an instruction, we are trying to turn an inner intention into shared action. The picture in our head, however, cannot pass directly into the other person's body. We need intermediaries: words, voice, a look, a gesture, an example, a video, a drawing or a physical demonstration.

It is worth imagining this process as a chain of transmission. The intention first exists as an inner representation in the person giving the instruction. We translate it into some form that can be encoded; the other person then perceives it, interprets it, builds their own inner picture from it and turns it into action. At every transition, the information can change. It is at these transitions that it is decided how much of the original intention survives.

The chain of transmission

1. Intention
2. Wording and choice of channel
3. Reception and interpretation
4. Action
5. Checking back
6. Correction, if needed

An instruction is like a bridge. On one side is the intention, on the other the execution. The bridge works if it is precise enough for the other person to cross it, and flexible enough for them to be present on it with their own knowledge, body and sensitivity.

Consider a simple workplace example. "Send me the figures" leaves the receiver to guess which figures, in what form and by when.

> “By 3 p.m. today, email me a spreadsheet showing last month’s sales by product. Use the figures in the shared sales report, include a total, and flag any missing data. Before you begin, tell me which report you will use.”

The second version gives a result, a source, a format, a deadline and a check of understanding. The same bridge is at work on a film set, in a classroom and in an office.

If the bridge is too vague, the other person starts guessing. If it is too narrow, it tries to regulate every movement and every thought in advance. A good instruction gives a clear frame, but it also shows where the responsibility of the performer, colleague or creative partner begins.

Three principles from choreographic thinking carry over directly into giving instructions:

- Every decision has a purpose.
- Form only makes sense if it serves the intention.
- Realization always adapts to the particular person, space, time and circumstances.

An instruction, then, is not talk for its own sake. It prepares action.