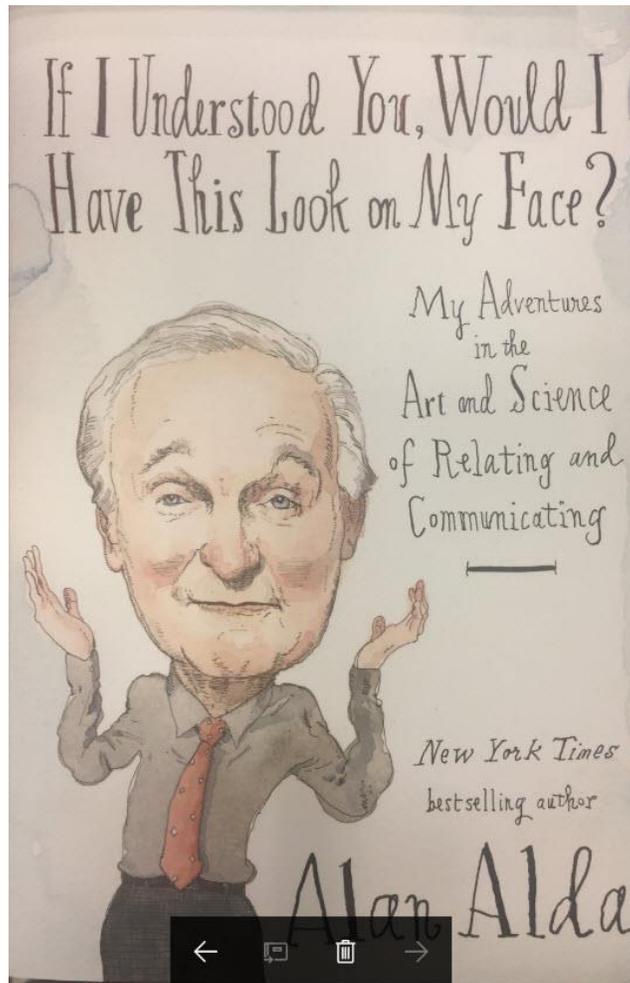


***Alan Alda's If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?: My  
Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating***

By Eric Chudler, Ph.D.



*Editor's Note: A primary function of my role is asking top neuroscientists to write about the latest developments in their specialty areas for lay readers. If they agree to the assignment, I encourage them to use—whenever possible—conversational language, anecdotes, storytelling, and their own voice in communicating what are often complex and hard-to-explain topics. Another option might be to suggest they read Alan Alda's new book before they begin.*

Most people know Alan Alda as an actor on TV (*M\*A\*S\*H*, *The West Wing*, *The Blacklist*), in film (*Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *The Aviator*) or on stage (*Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Love Letters*). Few may realize that Alda has also championed efforts to help scientists improve the way they communicate their work. Alda started this quest in 1993 as the host of the PBS television series *Scientific American Frontiers* and he continues this work at the [Alan Alda Center for Communication Science](#) at Stony Brook University. In his new book, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*, Alda describes his efforts to provide scientists and health professionals with tools to communicate clearly with the lay public.

As you might expect from a book about effective communication, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* is written in a way that is easy to understand. With humor and a clear, concise, and never stilted writing style, Alda takes readers on his journey to help experts convey neuroscience and other complex scientific topics to a variety of audiences.

Alda describes how his extensive experiences as an actor have given him skills that help him communicate with others. He explains how improvisational games and exercises can teach people to better understand themselves and their audiences. One such game, “mirroring,” starts with one person moving and a second copying the movements. After a while, the movements of the two people become synchronized. Another exercise involves tossing an imaginary ball back and forth. These and other fun activities are designed to help people relate to one another. And that’s a recurring theme throughout the book: to become a better communicator you must understand what other people are thinking. You must put yourself in the shoes of your audience and develop empathy.

The value of empathy for effective communication is underscored when Alda explains research he and others have conducted. He acknowledges that much of his own is anecdotal in nature, making it impossible to draw definitive conclusions about its significance. He admits that he does not know if his short workshops and talks have a long-lasting positive impact on participants’ ability to communicate. But in summarizing the work of other researchers, some published in the scientific literature, Alda describes a growing body of evidence that confirms the value of empathy and

effective communication. For example, sports teams that had better communication skills and more empathy were more successful; doctors who were rated as more empathic had patients who showed more gains in their health.

As a scientist, I would have liked the book to include citations to these studies, which would allow me to read the original papers and evaluate the research for myself. But then, the book is intended for a general audience, and perhaps Alda thought such a list would distract readers. And he should know; he and others have taught techniques to help thousands of people in workshops and events around the world to become better communicators. His work and that of trained researchers provide a rich source of theories and hypotheses about the keys to effective communication. Future experiments can test these ideas and help refine strategies to this end.

A motif that recurs throughout the research is that attentive listening and the ability to know whether an audience is engaged are essential for successful communication. To gauge your own level of empathy, Alda suggests the “Reading the Mind in the Eyes” test developed by Simon Baron-Cohen, in which people are shown photos of others in different emotional states. The twist is that test-takers are shown only the eyes of the other people, and must decide what emotion is being felt by each person from this alone.

When Alda took the test, he correctly identified the emotions in 33 of the 36 photos. I took it and scored the emotions correctly in 32 of 36. Interestingly, Alda improved his score by meditating and focusing on his breathing. This reinforced his belief that empathy can improve with practice and with attention to one’s own feelings and thoughts. (You can find several versions of the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test [online](#), to experiment on yourself.)

Alda states that he dislikes “tips” because they are weak unless they come with experience or story, but he provides many strategies useful for anyone who needs to express his or her point of view. Storytelling is one of the most powerful. Stories, especially those with emotional content, are particularly effective in creating long-lasting memories in listeners. In his book, Alda practices what he preaches by telling stories he has gathered over his years as an actor, host, and speaker. He also

warns that jargon can alienate listeners. Special phrases and abbreviations have their time and place—when everyone in a group understands their meaning. But it is confusing and can waste valuable time when a speaker uses language that listeners cannot understand.

Each of us needs the ability to convey ideas well, whether to co-workers, family members, the media, students, or juries. Although Alda focuses on improving the communication skills of scientists and physicians, his book, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* will be valuable to teachers, students, lawyers, accountants, bus drivers—to those in just about all occupations. Even spouses, parents, and children who need help talking to each other can benefit from Alda's advice. We all need to communicate clearly.

### **Bio**

**Eric H. Chudler**, Ph.D., is a neuroscientist at the University of Washington and the executive director of the Center for Sensorimotor Neural Engineering in Seattle. In addition to conducting research related to how the brain processes information from the senses, he has worked with fellow scientists and teachers to create materials to help the public understand how the brain works. Chudler has conducted workshops and given presentations to a variety of audiences including precollege students, university students, teachers, judges, and Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns. He has also published several books for general audiences, including *Brain Bytes: Quick Answers to Quirky Questions About the Brain* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2017) and *The Little Book of Neuroscience Haiku* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2013). Chudler graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1980 with a B.S. degree in Psychobiology and attended the University of Washington, where he received an M.S. degree and a Ph.D. degree from the Department of Psychology. His post-doctoral work was performed at the National Institutes of Health.