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1 - Introduction

One of the most important assets that any person has is their ability to communicate successfully with others. Everything that we say or do to another person will have an effect on them, even if this is not always evident. How we communicate our thoughts and feelings face to face shows how we understand others, not simply by the words they use, but by what we see and hear.

Our tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture etc. are as important as any words used. Interpersonal skills are what we use when communicating, and successful use of these skills will create and maintain good relationships with people, both socially and at work.

- Good interpersonal skills help prevent situations going wrong in the first place, and can cut through the barriers we sometimes erect in response to bad communications. They can create and keep open the channels of communication which help others to understand clearly what we mean, without causing bad feeling. Perhaps, most importantly, good interpersonal skills can give us all a sense of well - being and achievement.



2 - Assessing Yourself

It is worth taking the time to reflect on your own communication skills, before working on how to improve them. Think about how you would answer the following questions in regard to how you would normally behave:

- 1 At work, how much time do you spend talking?
How would that compare with the amount of time you spend listening?

- 2 Do you rely on one method of communication more so than others?

- 3 How do you react to criticism?

- 4 Do you always get what you want?

- 5 Are you influenced greatly by the opinions of those around you?

- 6 Can you accept praise?

- 7 Can you say what you mean?



8 Do you wait for others to motivate you, or can you motivate yourself and others?

9 What are your goals?

10 How did you manage to achieve any goals that you have already met?



3 - The Different Types of Behaviour

Behaviour comprises of tone of voice, our body language and everything that others can see and hear about us. There are four main types of behaviour. Most people have characters which denote a little of each type. The following descriptions are an exaggerated view of each type, but demonstrate clearly the main characteristics.

The four main types are:

1 - Aggressive Behaviour:

- Aggressive behaviour is loud and overbearing.
- The aggressive person belittles others to make themselves appear more superior. This appearance of superiority is very important to them. If they are ever threatened in any way, they will react by flying off the handle and attack. People around this person live in fear of their next outburst and they are often resented.
- Aggressive behaviour will not win the longer term help and co-operation of others. One may "win the battle" but lose the war.
- People will react defensively to the aggressive person. withhold information from them, be aggressive in return and do everything they can do to make life difficult for the person.

2 - Passive Behaviour

- This person is a door mat.
- They are the exact opposite to the aggressive type of person. Where the aggressive type of person will dive into a situation, the passive person will opt out.
- They tend to find it very difficult to make decisions for himself, so others will have to make decisions for them. They think themselves as victims of life. No matter what happens in their life they think that it is the fault of someone else.
- They have a "woe is me" attitude to life, constantly putting themselves down and always refusing compliments.
- People around them become frustrated with their negative attitude to things and will soon tire of pointing out positive things and of their lack of willpower.



3 - Manipulative Behaviour

- The manipulative person is a little like the aggressive person, except with the manipulative type of behaviour one is never quite sure what has happened.
- They leave no trace!
- They are devious, cunning and two-faced.
- People around them are uncomfortable because they never know exactly where they stand with them and are always nervous of being "stabbed in the back".

4 - Assertive Behaviour

- The assertive person respects themselves and those around them. They accept both their good and bad points and therefore are more capable of accepting others.
- They are responsible for decisions and choices in their own life. They ask directly and openly for what they need and want.
- Any rejection does not bring on devastation because the assertive person is never at the mercy of the approval of other people.
- Some people often think that being assertive means being awkward. They confuse behaviour, such as shouting or screaming to get your way, or foot stomping or sulking with assertiveness. These are all behaviour options, but none of them reflect the assertiveness trait.
- Being assertive gives a person the best chance of resolving a situation in a satisfactory manner.
- Being assertive helps others to be the same, and that gives every one involved in any situation the ability to be heard and to reach a solution agreeable to all.
- When a group of people all want different things, listening to each others viewpoint is perhaps one of the most important first steps on the road to compromise.



4 - Assertiveness

Having evaluated the four different types of behaviour and taking into consideration that most people would adopt certain elements of each type, given different situations and dilemmas, it is clear that the most positive behavioural type is Assertive Behaviour.

Assertiveness is something that can be practised and learned. There are four basic Assertiveness Techniques. These are:

- 1 State your case clearly and directly**
- 2 Construct responses through active listening**
- 3 Use the broken record technique**
- 4 Strive to find a workable compromise**

These techniques are adaptable. They can be manipulated and developed, and should be used more as a tool, rather than a rule set in stone.

1 How to state your case clearly and directly

- Be specific.
- Get straight to the point. Preambling tends to lose any listener and make them wonder when the speaker will get to the point.
- This is the key to this technique - decide what exactly your point is and state exactly what it is without all the necessary padding that we tend to use when we are anxious e.g.
"Oh, I'd love to say yes, but, you know, really, with the way things are, if only you had asked last week, I mean you haven't given me much notice, and actually this time I have to say no"
- The padding here often weakens your statement and confuses the listener.
- Practise making a clear statement or request without the preamble.



Say what you know you want to say and keep to the point.

- Be direct and clear.
- Once you have decided on your request or statement the second hurdle is to be able to say clearly and directly what it is you want or feel.
- If you only hint or complain at what you want, you will rarely get it.
- Check whether or not you have made a clear request, or if you think the other person ought to know what you want and feel without having to spell it out for them.
- Do not rely on the telepathic abilities of the other person, as they may not always be up to scratch!

2 How to construct responses through active listening

Show that you are attending to what a speaker is saying to you through:

- Appropriate body language
 - leaning forward slightly to show interest
 - keeping eye contact
 - nodding your head in agreement
- Using non-verbal reaction such as "Mmm" and "Uh huh".
- Using verbal reinforcements such as "I see" and "Yes, go on".
- Offering emphatic statements such as "I understand".
- Asking questions to clarify or gain greater understanding.
- Summarising what has been said, with phrases like "Let's stop there and go over what we have been through so far" or "I would like to make a list of the main points that you've made, as a reminder of what has just been covered".
- Paraphrasing what has been said with phrases such as "So you are saying that..." or "Would it be true to say that you mean..."
- Do not allow the other person to control your behaviour by reacting to their behaviour.



The benefits of active listening:

- It lets the speaker know that they are being attended to.
- It prevents the speaker making false assumptions about being understood.
- The speaker receives feedback in the impression being made.
- The listener stays involved, instead of switching off until it is their turn to say something.
- It enables the listener and the speaker get to the heart of the matter very quickly.
- It helps both parties to decide what needs to be done.
- It demonstrates that the listener values what the speaker is saying.

3 Use the broken record technique

- This is where statements are made, and repeated, calmly and clearly.
- If the other person responds aggressively, changes the subject or refuses to listen, the statement is repeated.
- The tone of voice is calm and polite.
- This technique helps to concentrate the mind of both people on the issue, and will help prevent you from being manipulated into the other person's strategy, or having your objection dismissed out of hand.

4 Strive to find a workable compromise

- This is useful in deadlock situations.
- It can lead to discussion and negotiation and lay down foundations for agreement, where there is a log jam.
- You have to give something in order to get something, e.g. "I realise we're stuck in this so if you are prepared to reconsider the timings, I will rethink my deadline"
- Workable compromise can open tightly shut channels of communication when it is done calmly and genuinely.



5 Communication Skills

Communication is a fundamental 'people' skill which we use to get things done and to develop relationships with other people. Most everyday tasks require communication. We go through this process subconsciously and generally successfully. Sometimes however, with a little consideration and thought many situations can be improved if better communication was possible.

There are four fundamental communication skills:

- **Reading**
- **Writing**
- **Speaking**
- **Listening**

Surprisingly, out of this list, the two most important communication tools are Speaking and Listening.

Some important points to note when speaking are:

Clarity - Speak clearly, don't mumble

Tone - Sound friendly and interested

Modulation - Vary your voice so that it sounds interesting

For most people Listening is their weakest communication skill. Better listening comes from doing the following:

Concentrate

Don't interrupt

Don't judge

Clarify understanding by asking questions

Reflect back

Try some of these points next time you are having a conversation - be it with a colleague or a friend - you might be surprised how much more interesting it may be.



Questions

Another important communication skill is the ability to ask questions. Their purpose is to get and clarify information - and without information how could we ever find out what we can do, or what it is that we are supposed to be doing, for someone else?

In general, you should start with open questions; continue with probing questions; ask closed questions to establish critical facts and then summarise that point. Always be clear about the purpose of your question before you ask them.

Concentrate on using open and probe questions ('How do you feel about...') - but remember not to ask too many closed questions ('Are you.....'), unless the situation really calls for it.



6 - Dealing with Criticism

A high proportion of the feedback that we get throughout our everyday lives is negative and critical. Whilst criticism can be helpful when it's given in the right circumstances, it is often given for the wrong reasons. For example, the criticism may come from someone who wants to:

- Feel superior
- Get their own back for some reason
- Vent their own negative feelings
- Blame another person rather than accept responsibility for a particular problem.

Too often criticism is offered at a time that suits the needs of the person giving it, rather than those of the recipient. If something goes wrong, the recipient is likely to be aware of it. Their mind will be full of their own thoughts, fears, perceptions etc.

They are like a glass filled to the brim and overflowing. In an ideal situation they would be left to let some of the contents of this "glass" drain away before being questioned or accused.

This is rarely the case and so we must all learn how to deal with criticism without becoming overly defensive and taking every little thing to heart. Criticism can be positive as well as being negative.

Criticism should be accepted when:

- 1 It is directed at a situation, rather than a person.
- 2 It recognises that there may be problems that the recipient of the criticism has been struggling to deal with.
- 3 It leads to a joint analysis of the problem and why it has arisen.
- 4 It is spoken objectively and directly.
- 5 It is given in private.
- 6 It is not allowed to affect subsequent relations between the giver and the recipient of the criticism.
- 7 The recipient has had a chance to deal with their own feelings about a situation, and is ready and able to give their attention to someone else's views.



Criticism should be questioned when:

- 1 It blames the person or people concerned.
- 2 It assumes the recipient of the criticism is in the wrong, and deserves a verbal punishment.
- 3 It assumes that things should be better, but offers no indication of how this could be achieved.
- 4 It is hinted at or delivered in a roundabout way.
- 5 It is given in public.
- 6 It lingers on in the relationship between the giver and recipient of criticism.
- 7 The recipient is still struggling to come to terms with their own feelings and cannot create sufficient space in their mind for anyone else's views.

How to receive negative and positive feedback constructively

If the feedback is **negative**, the recipient should:

- Try not to respond emotionally, or become defensive.
- Never deny responsibility or attack back.
- Ask questions to establish the precise nature of the feedback.
- Ask for suggestions about what the other person would like to be different.
- Never block out the feedback on the grounds that the person who is critical could not possibly know anything about anything, anyway.

If the feedback is **positive**, a polite and gracious "thank you" is usually enough.

If the praise was **not specific**, then the recipient might ask for more information by saying:

- "Thank you. What was it in particular that you liked?"
- "What particular aspects of this do you think were better than last time?"

These points can be used not only to deal with any criticism that you may receive, but also to help you in situations where you are giving the criticism.



7 - Confrontational Skills

Some situations take time to sort out. There may be a problem within groups of people or indeed a problem with certain elements of work. If things are not dealt with and issues are left to smoulder in the minds of the people involved they can turn into much bigger, complicated problems.

When this happens the best thing to do is to take the situation "by the horns" and confront any problem issues head on. Before doing this however, it is worth planning how exactly you are going to go about doing it. The following are some guidelines to help get the most favourable outcome from a confrontational situation:

- 1 Prepare
- 2 Arrange a time and a place
- 3 Start by taking responsibility for the situation
e.g. "I should have tried to sort this out before now.."
- 4 State feelings honestly
- 5 Describe the behaviour - do not label the person
 - Stick to the statement of fact, not opinion
 - Be specific, do not infer
 - Do not be judgmental
 - Be exact
 - Be brief
- 6 Describe the effects of their behaviour
- 7 Ask for specific change
- 8 Listen actively to response
- 9 Repeat requests or come to a workable compromise
- 10 Outline consequences
- 11 End on a positive note



8 - Positive Thinking

It is very easy to develop a negative attitude and constantly criticise yourself and those around you. It is also very tiring. A positive outlook on life makes everything more interesting, more fun and helps us to get through the more negative periods of life with more ease. Everyone has the right to be positive, no one deserves to be walked on or shunned to the back. Understand your own importance and others will take the lead from you.

- You have the right to state your own needs - regardless of what role in life you play.
- You have the right to be treated with respect as an intelligent, capable and equal human being.
- You have the right to express your feelings, opinions and values - and they are as important as anyone else's.
- You have the right to say yes and no for yourself.
- You have the right to make mistakes.
- You have the right to say "I don't understand".
- You have the right to ask for what you want.
- You have the right to decline responsibility for other people's problems.
- You have the right to deal with other people without being dependant on approval.

Use these rights!



9 - Conclusion

Personally developing yourself is something that only you can do. It doesn't happen overnight, but developing certain aspects of your own personality and eliminating some of the negative ones can be one of the most rewarding things anyone can do with regard to long term happiness and fulfillment.

- Draw up a plan, introducing gradually small changes where you will strive to listen more or assert yourself in situations where you would normally take a back seat.
- Crystallise your thinking. Determine what goal you would like to achieve and dedicate yourself to getting it.
- Develop a desire for life and the things that you want to do and get from it.
- Have confidence in yourself and believe in what you can do. If you can't do something - learn how to do it.
- No matter what obstacles come in your way, be determined to exercise your plan and achieve whatever it is that you have set out to do.
- Give yourself a small reward every time you do something really positive.
- Be happy within yourself and others will be happy for you.

