

Core interpersonal skills

Introduction

This paper describes and provides guidelines for the core interpersonal skills than underpin all forms of social interaction. These skills are so basic as to be easily taken for granted, but if they are not well honed, it will be very hard to master more complex skills like interviewing, data collection, influencing and negotiating.

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1 Listening

Introduction

Listening is the process of receiving and making sense of verbal communication. Receiving is primarily a property of the ears - actually hearing what was said. Making sense of what was heard occurs at two levels: recognising and understanding the words and interpreting what the speaker really meant and felt. This can only take place in conjunction with the observation and interpretation of non-verbal behaviour: how the words are said and the accompanying body language. Finally, communication can only really be said to have been listened to if the content can be recalled.

This section reviews the problems which occur with listening, identifies the main causes and proposes some guidelines for effective (active) listening.

Problems

Three main types of problem can be identified:

Non-reception

What was said is simply not heard - the communication just did not register.

Distortion

What was said did get through, but was misheard, misunderstood, misinterpreted or distorted in some way. This may apply to the whole message or may be highly selective.

Non-retention

The information “went in one ear and out the other”. This seems to most often be a problem with factual information: names, directions, arrangements etc.

Causes of these problems

Some messages are harder to hear than others

Distance, background noise, physical distractions etc. can all make it hard to hear. Some people are harder to hear than others: people who speak softly, incoherently, very quickly, with strong or unfamiliar accents and so on. There is not always much to be done to change this sort of situation - the main requirement is to concentrate or intensively on the listener.

Some messages are harder to understand than others

Communication which is full of facts and details, concerns unfamiliar subject matter, includes lots of jargon and abbreviations etc. will pose increased problems for the listener. Under such conditions, a more active and interventionist style of listening will be called for - in particular,

lots of clarifying questions will need to be asked along with frequent summaries to check understanding.

Causes internal to the listener

The causes noted above are the most obvious, but the most prevalent are probably those internal to the listener. We tend to listen least well when we:

- Are tired.
- Are under stress.
- Believe we already know the other's point of view.
- Are anxious to speak ourselves.
- Are angry or are emotionally involved in the subject matter.
- Are uninterested in what is being said, believing it to be unimportant or irrelevant to our concerns.
- Dislike the speaker.
- Believe the speaker is not being open with us.
- Have our mind on other things.

In other words, listening suffers when we are either over-involved in the subject (when we will interrupt, over-talk, finish sentences, argue etc. or under-involved (when we will daydream or think our own thoughts). Under involvement is made easier by the fact that we can think much more quickly than we speak, so that usually when someone is talking only part of the time is required to make sense of the words, the rest being available either for actively searching after meaning or for self-distraction.

Clearly the main requirement is to focus your attention on what the speaker is really saying and not on yourself or your reactions.

Active listening

The checklist below describes good listening behaviour.

- Take up a relaxed but alert posture.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Make encouraging noises (mm, uh huh).
- Minimise distractions (noise, visual, interruptions).

- Take notes (if appropriate).
- Focus your attention on the other person. Value what they are saying.
- Suspend judgement.
- Keep cool and emotionally detached.
- Use “spare time” to seek the real meaning of what the other person is saying. Look for themes, links, gaps, feelings.
- Ask clarifying and reflecting questions (see section 2).
- Summarise and check understanding (see section 3).
- Don’t interrupt.

2 Asking questions

Introduction

Asking questions is a basic way to promote insight and understanding - both your own and that of the person you are talking to. Not all questions are equally effective however and this section seeks to identify the kinds of questions which are likely to be most productive. The most appropriate mix of questions will depend upon your precise purpose and on the context in which you are asking them. Questions of course have many other uses. They may serve to demonstrate knowledge or insight and to create expectations. They may also reveal information e.g. about what you don't know or about what is important to you.

The art of effective questioning is to allow your questions to be guided by the answers you are getting rather than by a pre-determined list - in this way you are far more likely to discover what the other person truly has to say. You need to begin with a list of topics or issues to explore, but after that you can rely on listening carefully to what the other person is saying and using a range of effective types of question.

Types of questions

Open

Open questions invite the other person to talk about a topic in their own words, to say what they want to say. They typically begin with the words what, how and why. They are the only way to discover another person's views, ideas, opinions and feelings - in other words to get at subjective information. They are particularly important for discovering things you did not know that you did not know.

Closed

Closed questions are those which invite a one word answer - in particular a yes or no. Often facts of this kind are necessary to make sense of a more discursive answer - but beware of collecting facts which interest you when the person you are talking to is describing their view of a situation - the facts may be irrelevant.

Clarifying

One risk area is to be blinded by detail or swamped by unfamiliar information. The only answer is to carefully clarify everything you are not sure of. Never assume you know, never hope it will all come clear - clarify. "Can you give me an example?" can be an especially useful way of clarifying.

Reflecting

Reflecting is a technique for gently clarifying, for extending a line of questioning or probing a answer. It simply involves replaying a word or phrase which the other person has just used and putting a question mark in the tone of voice i.e. finishing on the up. It is exceptionally effective and yet involves only minimal intervention into the conversation.

Probing

Sometimes the answer you have been given needs to be explored further. This will most often be when it was delivered with particular feeling or emphasis, when it is incomplete (e.g. “The **main** problem was ...”), when there is repetition. Apparent after-thoughts and asides are often especially worth exploring.

Precision

Answers often indicate that information has been suppressed or not revealed (not necessarily consciously). Precision questions seek to recover this information.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Possible questions</i>
Universals	Everybody / nobody Always / never All Every, everything	Everybody? Are there any exceptions to that? Can you think of an occasion when that was not the case?
Imperatives and limitations	I can't I must not / should not It's essential that ... It's impossible I ought to / have to	What would happen if you did / didn't ... What stops you / it ... What makes it essential (etc.)
Comparatives	It's better / worse	Than what? In what way?
Unspecified nouns and verbs	I want a change. She insulted me. They don't respect me. They say ...	What change specifically? How exactly did she insult you? Who specifically doesn't respect you? Who specifically says ..?

Bad habits

Excessive use of closed questions

This can come to resemble an interrogation or a guessing game. A predominantly open style is almost always more effective.

Leading questions

Leading questions signal the expected answer. The other person will normally agree and no new information is gained. Either the interviewer's prejudices are confirmed or the interviewee agrees without commitment. It is always possible to ask an open question.

Multiple questions

This is to ask two questions in one. In this situation most people answer only one question - usually the second, unless the first was in some way preferable. Although it is not difficult to recover from this situation, there is no point getting into it. Multiple questions can always be asked singly.

Forced choice questions

Was that because of A or B?

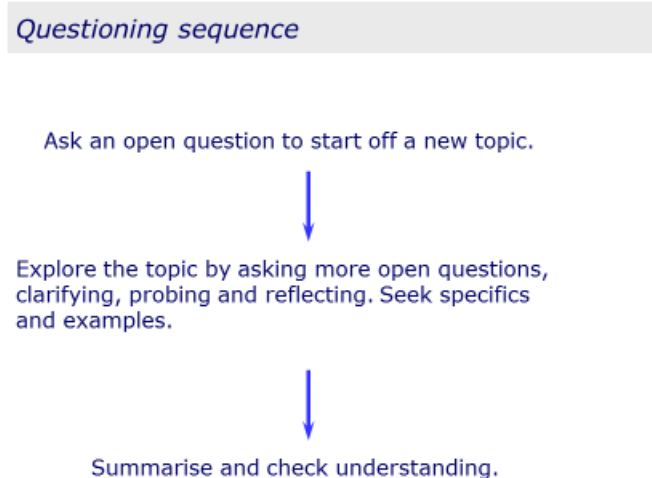
Frequently the answer is neither. It is always easier to ask an open question.

Fear of silence

A really good question requires some thinking time. Do not be afraid to give it - do not rush to fill the gap by asking another question.

A typical questioning sequence

A typical sequence is illustrated below. The topic is opened up, explored and then closed with a summary. Often the summary will generate additional exploration of the topic, but if the person says "yes that's right", then it is time to begin a new sequence with another open question.



Three level questioning technique

The concept of questioning at different levels can be a useful strategy when interviewing. It is a useful strategy when you want to get beyond factual information - when you want to understand the interviewee's feelings about the issue at hand, and when you wish to influence the other person. It is not intended to be a mechanistic process and you can move up and down from level to level as necessary.

We can identify three levels of questions:

Factual information / data

Questions at this level are necessary to piece together the nature of a problem and what has happened in the past. They are obviously useful in helping to understand the situation more fully. Questions at this level are usually:

What, who, where, when, how many etc.

In many interviews it is possible to go on asking data questions almost indefinitely. Of themselves however they give very little insight into the interviewee.

Meaning / Attraction / Interest

A different level of question pertains to the attraction something holds for the interviewee. Questions at this level usually begin with:

What do you feel about

What doesmean to you?

What do you get out of

At this level we are moving more into the interviewee's feelings about the issue and what meaning it has for him/her. This is important because we often make assumptions rather than asking the question.

Values / Attitudes

The next level of question is probing those items that the interviewee sees as important. We are asking why those items are important to him/her. The answers to these questions tell us what he/she places value upon and why. They also give us information about attitudes. This level of information may be important in coming to the interviewee's perception of the problem particularly when it differs from your perception and if your next step is to try influence the interviewee.

Questions here are usually of the type:

Why do you feel that

Why is that important to you?

3 Summarising

Introduction

Summarising simply involves stating your understanding of what you have been talking about with the other person or people at a meeting or interview. The classic way of beginning a summary is with the word “so”. For example, “So the main points are...”, “So, what you are saying is...”, “So, you feel...”. Other possibilities would be: “Let me check if I have understood what you are saying...”, “If I understood your point, it is that...”, and of course there are many others.

When to summarise

Probably everybody knows that it is good practice to summarise at the end of a meeting. There are however numerous other occasions during an interview or meeting when a summary is a much more effective intervention than either a question or a statement.

- To impose some structure. Suppose you have asked an open question such as, “What are the main problems at present?” and received a very full answer referring to a number of different issues. A summary is often the only way of avoiding being overwhelmed - “So, you’ve identified five main areas [list them], can we look at them in turn?”
- To buy some thinking time - “So, what you are saying is ...?”
- To encourage further elaboration of a point of view - “So, you feel ...?”
- To confirm to yourself and to your interviewee that you have in fact understood - “OK, so these are the main steps in the process ...”
- To draw a phase of a discussion to a close - “So, we’ve considered the main features of this issue and decided that ... now let’s look at ...”
- To bring a long-winded person back to the point - “OK, so in your view ... now let’s ...”

Types of summary

Summaries range from the absolutely literal, simply restating the other person’s exact words, through to the highly interpretative. The latter are often most valued and display a high level of empathy and understanding, but are clearly the most risky and demanding. Such summaries may be introduced by phrases such as: “So, what you’re really saying is...”, or, “It seems to me that...”.

Guideline

There is really only one rule when it comes to summarising: **Get it right**. Failure to do so suggests that either you have not been listening or that you are out to manipulate.

4 Non-verbal behaviour

Introduction

This section provides a brief review of the main types of non-verbal behaviour. It is important to stress at the outset that non-verbal behaviour is not a universal language which needs only to be decoded. There are well-known cultural differences and individual ones also. It is better understood as a source of information about what is going on inside a person's head which is available to us over and above what they actually say. Although some general interpretations can be offered, it is more important to try to understand the particular pattern of each individual's non-verbal behaviour - how they look when they are pleased, uncertain, resistant and so on.

Why it Matters

Non-verbal cues are a major indication of how people are feeling. Non-verbal messages may replace, supplement or contradict verbal ones - in each case you need to notice them and be able to interpret and react to them.

You must also be aware of and able to control the cues and messages you are giving off yourself by your own non-verbal behaviour. Are you creating the impression and effect you intend?

One of the key issues is that of **consistency** between verbal and non-verbal behaviour - the latter, properly observed and interpreted, is often the most reliable guide (e.g. the person who says "yes, I agree, understand, will do" while displaying non-verbal signs which suggest hostility or confusion, etc.).

Types of non-verbal Behaviour

What follows is a list of some of the main types of non-verbal behaviour with a few interpretative comments. It is important to be aware that there are cultural and individual variations in what is normal.

Eye contact

A typical pattern is that people do not look at their listener all the time that they are talking but look to get some response at the end of each statement and give a longer look to signal that they have finished. Sustained eye contact by the listener implies concerned interest (and certainly attentive listening). Not looking implies disinterest and can be a good way of discouraging the over-talkative. A steady gaze is associated with trust and confidence - the converse with being "shifty".

Physical contact

An area of major cultural difference. In our society contact is associated closely with intimacy and the giving of comfort.

Proximity

Proximity concerns how close people stand or sit in relation to each other. This again is an area where there are great cultural differences.

Orientation

The main options are: face-to-face, at right angles, side-by-side. This sequence implies decreasing formality.

Posture

Elements in posture are whether the arms are folded, whether the person holds him or herself stiffly or in a relaxed way, upright or slouched, leaning forward or leaning back. Variations in posture can signify interest / boredom, relaxation / tension, authority / submission, etc.

Gesture, hand and foot movements

The same sort of indications as for posture. Nodding is particularly important for encouraging interviewees to speak.

Facial expression

Can indicate surprise, fear, doubt, worry, certainty, etc. Can be a major clue for the interviewer.

Tone of voice

Can confirm or deny the content of what is said. Related considerations are pitch and speed of statement.

Noises other than words

On the positive side, “mm” is very useful and indicative of interest, encouragement. On the negative side, “er” and “um” can indicate nervousness, lack of preparation, etc.

5 Confronting

Introduction

Confronting involves raising another person's awareness of limiting attitudes or behaviour. This means telling them in an open and straightforward way about things which they are doing, have done or possibly have not done which you find unacceptable or inappropriate or which you think limit them in some way. For example, you may wish to confront someone who constantly interrupts you in a meeting, someone who has repeatedly failed to deliver work they promised or someone who is clinging to an unrealistic view of the world rather than face the necessity of changing their behaviour (e.g. saying "it'll never happen."). Many people find confronting to be one of the most difficult interpersonal skills.

Confronting must be carefully distinguished from "confrontation" which implies aggravation and conflict.

In the context of a working relationship, confronting interventions can be appropriate in several contexts:

- At the beginning of a project where the client is "naïve" about his / her needs i.e. you can and want to provide a service to them but not what they think or say they want.
- During a project when some limiting attitude or behaviour on the part of the client is likely to jeopardise the outcome for you and them. For example, the client is placing inappropriate demands on you or fails to do things which were promised.
- If you diagnose that the client's behaviour is a major contributor to, or even the cause of, the problem you are trying to solve.
- In workshops, interviews and meetings where people are behaving in unhelpful ways.

Confronting issues

Why is confronting so difficult for so many of us? Why do we often avoid or make a mess of it? There appear to be four main reasons:

- A confronting intervention is usually unsolicited (i.e. it has not been contracted for), unlike other types of consultant behaviour where there is usually explicit or implicit permission from the client.
- If the client is consciously unaware, the intervention may induce something of a shock; you cannot be sure how they will handle it.
- There is generated in the would-be confronter a perfectly rational anxiety, centred around confidence in the issue and facing the consequences.
- All this is compounded by past negative experiences where confrontation was mishandled or avoided.

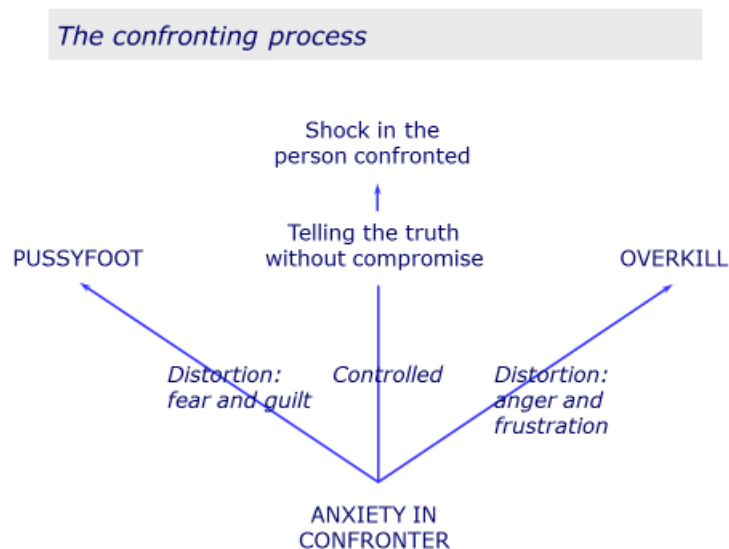
The confronting process

The layers of anxiety generated by these issues can distort the confronting intervention in one of two ways:

- **Pussyfooting:** tiptoeing around the problem, dodging the issue or even avoiding it altogether. You lose respect and the client is confused.
- **Overkill:** sledgehammering with aggressive and wounding behaviour. The client loses respect and becomes angry.

Sometimes a swing from one to the other suddenly occurs, leaving the client confused and irritated.

The process may be represented thus, with the central path requiring a controlled, uncompromising but non-hurtful intervention.



Confronting sequence

It is usually helpful to think in terms of a structure for a confronting intervention in order to remove at least some of the anxiety. The following sequence is offered as a model:

1. Raise the person's consciousness about the issue: e.g. "I'd like to talk to you about..."
2. Give a clear account of the behaviour or attitude, describing it exactly as it is. (This may be based on your own evidence or on concrete evidence from others.)

3. Give your reasons for raising the issue, with your opinions and judgements expressed as such.
4. Give space for the client's reaction, providing support where appropriate and listening carefully. Resist the temptation to repeat what you have said or express regret.
5. Make proposals and suggestions and negotiate an agreed action or actions for change.
6. If 5. is not possible, give a clear description of the action you will take.

Other points

- Focus clearly on **what** you are confronting. For example, if a person has repeatedly failed to deliver some work, you should confront the repetition rather than the latest failure.
- Try to maintain eye contact while confronting - this will increase the impact and authenticity of what you are doing.
- Resist the temptation to use softening words (e.g. "quite", "to some extent") or to keep on talking after you have said what you have to say - these serve only to soften the message.
- Equally, avoid sarcasm, emotional language and put downs as these will increase the risk of conflict at the expense of a resolution of the issue
- Sometimes you may additionally have to confront the person's failure to respond appropriately to the issue you have raised.

6 Saying “no”

Introduction

This section provides a framework for how to say no with maximum likelihood of acceptability and certainly while maintaining your self-respect. We assume that you have decided that saying no is the right thing for you to do and the issue is how to do so to best effect. Whether it is in fact the right thing is of course another story.

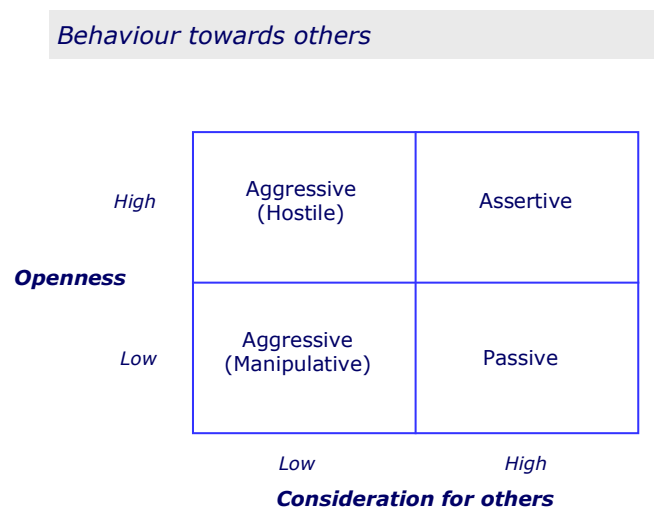
Problems with saying no

Saying no may be experienced as difficult for a number of reasons:

- You are unclear about your own wants and preferences - if this is the case, you have no real basis on which to refuse requests.
- Fear that the other person will cease to like you or will take offence.
- Feeling that you have neither the power nor the right to do so.
- Fear of adverse consequences.
- A desire to curry favour or incur obligation.
- Feeling guilty.
- Wanting to be helpful.

Ways of responding to others

How you deal with saying no is partly about how open you are about your own needs and wants and partly about how much consideration you show for the needs of others.



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Thus, the overtly aggressive person will say no in a very forthright and hostile way which achieves the end of refusing, but in a way which wounds the other party and leaves them resentful and hurt. The passively aggressive person will avoid actually saying no, but will convey the message indirectly through actions and by undermining the legitimacy of the request. The passive person will avoid conflict at all costs and either give in or seek to fudge the issue.

The desirable approach is assertive, in the sense of being open about your own position while respecting the rights of the other person. A model for assertively saying no is presented below.

Assertively saying no

1. Listen to ensure understanding.
2. Express regret, if appropriate
3. Say “No” (not “Maybe” or “I’ll try”) in a pleasant, calm, emotionally fairly neutral tone
4. Give reasons - if appropriate.
5. Show empathy (“I can appreciate that this will cause you problems”, etc.)
6. Suggest alternatives - if possible.
7. It may be necessary to repeat steps 5 and 3 together if the request is put persistently: “Yes, I can see it is extremely difficult, but I can’t help”. This sort of phrasing can be repeated many times over, when it is known as “broken record”.

Sometimes step 4 may more effectively precede step 3.

If you can’t say no

If you can’t say no, it is quite often appropriate to try “If”. For example, “If you want me to do this, what shall I therefore drop”, “If you want this done today, can I postpone this other task you wanted me to do today?”

7 Giving support

Introduction

Support can be given to other people in relation to them as people, in relation to their qualities, attitudes, feelings and beliefs and in relation to their behaviour and performance.

Support depends upon focusing your attention on the other person in the same sort of way as with listening. And it requires authenticity: you have got to mean it. Otherwise, overtly supportive behaviours may be seen as manipulative or patronising.

How to provide support

The main behavioural ways of providing support are:

- Showing acceptance, legitimising the other person's views, feelings etc.; not being judgmental or disapproving.
- Empathising - indicating that you can appreciate their position.
- Agreeing and seeking common ground - i.e. trying to find things to agree about and focusing on those.
- Building on their ideas and contributions.
- Encouragement.
- Explicitly giving approval and praise.
- Offering help in practical ways.