

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

1. INTRODUCTION

You have been interviewing for 2 months, and so far, you haven't gotten a single job offer. After another interview that didn't go well, you run into a close friend, Wayne, who notices you look unhappy and asks what's wrong. Instead of just offering quick sympathy, Wayne suggests the two of you go to lunch and talk. Over pizza, you disclose that you are starting to worry that you won't find a job, and you wonder what's wrong with you. Wayne listens closely and lets you know he cares about your concerns. Then, he tells you about other friends he knows who also haven't yet gotten job offers. All of a sudden, you don't feel so alone. Wayne reminds you how worried you felt last semester when you were struggling with your Mathematics module and then scored a B on the final. As you listen to Wayne, your sagging confidence begins to recover. Before leaving, Wayne tells you about a website that allows you to practise interviewing skills and he also works with you to come up with some new strategies for interviewing. By the time you leave, you feel hopeful again.

Interpersonal communication is central to our effectiveness and our everyday lives. It is the lifeblood of meaningful relationships in personal, social and professional contexts. We communicate to develop identities, establish and build relationships, coordinate efforts with others, have impact on issues that matter to us, and work out problems and possibilities. Our interpersonal communication skills are learned behaviors that can be improved through knowledge, practice, feedback, and reflection.

2. FEATURES OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication is an ongoing process by which people exchange information, feelings and meaning through verbal and non-verbal messages.

2.1 Irreversible Process

Communication evolves over time, becoming more personal as people interact. Friendships and romantic relationships gain depth and significance over the course of time, and they may also decline in quality over time. An ongoing process also has no discrete beginnings and endings. Suppose your friend stops by and confides in you about his family problem. When did that communication



begin? Although it may seem to have started when the friend came by, earlier interactions may have led the friend to feel that it was safe to talk to you and that you would care about the problem. Similarly, we don't know when the communication will end. Perhaps it ends when the friend leaves, but perhaps your response to the problem helps your friend see new options or maybe what you learn changes how you feel toward your friend.

The process of interpersonal communication is irreversible - you can wish you hadn't said something and you can apologise for something you said and later regret – but you cannot take it back. This implies that we have an ethical responsibility to communicate carefully.

2.2 Personal Knowledge of Unique Individuals

The deepest level of interpersonal communication involves engaging others as unique individuals who have their own fears and hopes, problems and joys, needs and abilities. When we communicate this way, we do not speak from social roles (teacher-student, boss-employee, customer-sales clerk). To connect as unique individuals, we have to get to know others personally and understand their thoughts and feelings. The personal knowledge we gain over time in relationships enables us to know and be known, to protect people we care about, or we can use it to hurt people and attack vulnerabilities others have revealed to us. Ethical communication chooses not to exploit or treat casually personal information about others.

3. EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

*'I am not what I think I am.
I am not what you think I am.
I am what I think you think I am.'*



Actually, a lot of our fears from meeting and relating to people come from a little game we play called 'I think that you think that I think'. We are so busy thinking about what we think the other person thinks of us that we lose sight of what we actually want to say to them. In essence, we are so busy thinking about whether we are making a good impression that we become nervous and self-conscious. We stop being ourselves. The best way to stop

the 'I think that you think that I think' record from playing itself over and over in your head is to concentrate on becoming more *interested* than *interesting*. Start all interpersonal communication with an open mind – be open to the ideas of others and be willing to put forward views of your own.

3.1 ‘BREAK THE ICE’

When meeting somebody for the first time, some simple tips will help you reduce the tension in the situation enabling both parties to feel more relaxed and thus communicate more effectively. Allan Pease and Alan Gardner in *Talk Language* suggest that you can talk about the situation, the other person or yourself. You can begin by asking a question, giving an opinion or stating a fact.



The best kind of icebreaker is one that is positive - after all, the last thing people want to hear from a stranger is how noisy the party is, how awful the food is, or how badly the people are dressed.

Some possible opening lines are suggested as follows:

3.1.1 Self- introduction

There may be occasions when it is necessary to introduce yourself. For example,



- “I don’t believe we have met. I’m....”
- “Hello ... It’s a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

By introducing yourself, you have actually started the ball rolling - the other party would be polite enough to reciprocate with at least his/her name.

Your self-introduction should be short, enthusiastic and tell people who you are. Provide a little information about yourself to help stimulate conversation. For example,

- “Hello, I’m Marilyn Sim and I’m a student at Nanyang Polytechnic.”

You don’t want to just say ‘I’m a student’. Giving more information about you serves as *conversation bait*. For example,

- “Hello, I’m Simon Tan and I’m a 2nd year student at Nanyang Polytechnic.”

You may also mention something that you both have in common. For example,

- “Hello, I’m Nix Tan. I saw you at the seminar on Multimedia Development last week.”

Such introductions open up an easy discussion about the seminar and other people you might both know

3.1.2 Make a statement, or a statement followed by a question.

Statements can be made:

- i) about the situation which may refer, for example, to the party, the place, the food, the guests or the company.
- ii) on the weather, or a current news event.
- iii) about the other person. A compliment is always a great icebreaker. Pease and Gardner in *Talk Language* suggest two ways to enhance the way we give compliments. He explains that we should not only say **what** we like, but also **why** we like something. Not just “*I like your dress*”, but “*I like your dress because the colour suits your complexion.*” Or: “*I like the comment you made at the seminar. It’s something many of us feel, but do not have the courage to verbalise.*”

3.1.3 Questions can be asked about the other person, the situation, or current events.

- (i) You can exchange basic information, for example:

“*What kind of work are you in?*”
“*Where do you live?*”
“*Are you a friend of the bride or groom?*”
“*What colour would you recommend for the banner?*”



- (ii) It is preferable to use open-ended questions instead of a string of close-ended questions, so as to encourage conversation and greater self-disclosure. Open-ended questions usually start with “**why**” or “**how**”. Examples:

“*How did you become involved in this project?*”
“*What brings you to Singapore?*”
“*Why did you choose this option?*”

3.1.4 A pleasant self-disclosure

It may be necessary to risk talking about yourself to help the conversation along and to let the other person know that you are interested in conversing. Disclosure indicates some degree of trust. We have to be careful about appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure. Too much self-disclosure too soon can have a negative impact.

The general guide is to give as much information as you receive. In the broadest sense, self-disclosure means sharing biological data (“I weighed 50kg when I was in Primary Three”), personal ideas (“I do not believe in the death penalty”) and information (“I practise modern dancing in school every day”).

3.1.5 Offering help

A good way of starting a conversation is to offer pertinent help. Example:

“*You look a little lost. Perhaps I can help you?*”

“*Can I get you a drink or something to eat?*”



3.2 BE A GOOD OBSERVER AND LISTENER

3.2.1 Read Body Language

Be observant and attentive to the visual cues sent out by others. For example, if you ask somebody whether they have any children and they frown or back off slightly, their visual cues show that you have probably touched a sensitive subject area for them. Likewise, be conscious of the body language and other non-verbal signals you are sending. For example, if you are sitting then lean forward towards the person you are talking to. Look at the other person and give plenty of eye-contact but be careful not to make them feel uncomfortable. When listening, nod and make encouraging sounds and gestures.

3.2.2 Listen Well

Listening is more than merely hearing with our ears. It is not just listening, but *how* you listen that is important. To be a good listener, you must cultivate an attitude of respect and acceptance towards others and in turn develop rapport. Remember that the people you are talking to are a hundred times more interested in themselves and their wants and problems than they are in you and your problems. A person’s toothache means more to that person than a famine, which kills a million people. Good listening demands concentration.

Give the speaker 100% attention. Prove that you care by stopping all activities. Resist being distracted by the surrounding noise, passers-by or how the speaker looks.



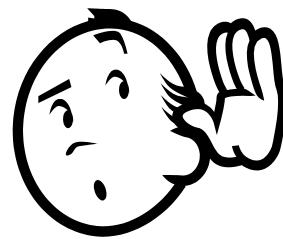
“Nature has given men one tongue but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak.”

- **Empathetic listening**

More than trying to make sense of content and words, listening with empathy means you get beneath the words to emotions. You listen to learn the often unverbalised intent of the speaker and exhibit real understanding of the speaker's message. It requires empathy, the ability to perceive from another person's point of view and to sense what that person is feeling.

It is not enough to say that you understand the other person by saying things like, “*I know how you must feel.*” Rather, show your understanding by identifying the emotions behind the words through the speaker's facial expressions and body language. Example:

- “That makes you feel **happy** then?”
- “You must be **worried** about them.”
- “You seem pretty **upset** about this mistake.”
- “These results seem to **disturb** you.”
- “I sense you are **uncomfortable** with this situation.”
- “You're really **angry** about that comment?”



Note that you respond by talking about feelings. These statements make no judgments about the speaker's message nor do they indicate your reaction. The speaker can continue to talk without stopping to worry about your response.

- **Techniques for Active Listening**

- (i) **Basic Acknowledgments**

Basic acknowledgements include verbal, visual, non-verbal signs and vocal sounds that let the speaker know we are listening with interest and respect, such as head-nodding, leaning forward or backward, making eye contact, saying “*Oh really*”, “*No-kidding*”, “*Tell me more*”, “*I hear you*”, “*I see*”, “*Yes*”.

(ii) **Attentive Silence**
“Silence is Gold, Words are Silver”. To keep silent is difficult, but when we succeed, we are able to find out more information from the speaker. The majority of listeners are uncomfortable with being silent, but in the spare time instead of letting their mind go off the conversation, they should: (a) observe the speaker facial expression, posture and gestures and (b) try to decode them and try to understand what the speaker is feeling.

(iii) **Questions**
The idea of asking questions may seem contradictory to the idea of listening. But an active listener is asking questions in order to show the speaker interest (a) in what is being said (b) in knowing more to gain a better understanding of the speaker’s point of view. Example:

“*You said your father broke his promise. What was his reason?*”
“*You mentioned you couldn’t study at home. Why?*”

Open-ended questions are preferable to close-ended questions, because they are providing opportunities for the speaker to open up, to explore his/her thoughts and feelings. Example:

“*How do you feel about that?*”
“*What might be the difficulties if you stopped work?*”

Close-ended questions are helpful to check specific facts and ask for clarifications. Example:

“*Do you want to complete your diploma?*”
“*Can you ask for no-pay leave for two weeks?*”



(iv) **Paraphrasing**
Paraphrasing focuses on the speaker’s content, summarising what was said in order to clarify and confirm correct understanding. The steps of the paraphrasing process are:
(a) Let the speaker finish what he/she wanted to say.
(b) Restate with your own words what you think the speaker has said
(c) If the speaker confirms your understanding continue the conversation
(d) If the speaker indicates you misunderstood, ask the speaker to repeat:
“*I don’t understand, could you say it again?*”

Example:

Statement: “I work part-time every day from 7pm to 12 midnight. Recently I have been feeling very tired and my studies have been affected. If I stop working, who is going to pay for my mobile phone bills and guitar lessons?”

Paraphrase:

“Let me see if I’ve got this right. You want to stop working part-time but are worried about your financial commitments?”

(v)

Mirroring feelings and reflecting meanings

Mirroring involves reflecting back to the speaker the emotions he/she is communicating. Do not miss the emotional dimension of a conversation, by focusing exclusively on the content. Encourage the speaker to disclose feelings –maybe joy, sorrow, frustration, anger or grief. The reflection of feelings will help the speaker understand his/ her own emotions and move toward a solution of the problem. In order to understand and mirror feelings, observe the feeling words and body language that the speaker uses. Example:

“*You feel disappointed that your father didn’t buy you a guitar as promised and you are angry that this is not the first time he broke his promise.*”

(vi)

Summative Reflections

A summative reflection is a brief restatement of the main themes and feelings the speaker expressed over a longer period of discussions. A good summarisation may help the speaker have a greater coherence, a better understanding of the situation and draw conclusions.

In the following response, the listener summarises what a person has said and adds a question to help the person move forward:

“*May I just check that I have understood this whole matter correctly? You’ve told me of a few choices open to you. You could procrastinate and do nothing, make an appointment to meet with your tutor, or enrol in a study skills group. None of the options feel like a perfect solution to you and you are feeling anxious about the upcoming examinations. What do you see as the pros and cons of each of these possibilities?*”

3.3 BE NON-JUDGEMENTAL

Let go of stereotypes and any preconceived ideas you may have about the people you are communicating with. Set aside biases and prejudices. Due to these stereotypes, we carry with us certain preconceptions of what they are thinking or how they are likely to behave and we may even have ideas about the outcome of the conversation. These preconceptions affect how we speak to others, the words we use and the tone of voice. Unfortunately our preconceptions of others are often incorrect. This can mean that our communication is inappropriate and therefore more likely to be misunderstood.

3.4 BE ENCOURAGING

3.4.1 Giving Specific Praises

The greatest humiliation in life is to work hard on something from which you expect great appreciation, and then fail to get it.

Edgar Watson Howe



Offer words and actions of encouragement, as well as praises to others. Make others feel welcome, valued and appreciated in your communications. A minute of praises and recognition can result in boosted morale and confidence.



Each of us has the power to recognise the goodness in others. Specific sincere praise pinpoints the precise action or accomplishment that merits praise and names it to the individual. Example:

We should not say **what** we like, but also **why** we like something. Not just “*I like your PowerPoint slides*” but “*I like your PowerPoint slides because they are very concise and have good colour contrast.*”

This fosters a genuineness and believability in the interaction.

Even when introducing people, you need to be honest and open and not hold back any of your good feelings about them, so that you ‘promote’ them to each other. So, instead of saying, “*Pat, I’d like you to meet a good friend of mine – Nicole*”, give Pat some more information about Nicole. Be generous in your praise of her and elaborate on who she is. You may say, “*Pat, I’d like you to meet a very dear friend of mine, Nicole. Nicole is a dancer and she’s also a good cook.*”

If you are the one being praised, accept sincere compliments graciously with a “*Thank you*”. Do not deny or negate the person giving you the praise.

3.4.2 Giving Feedback

“When looking at faults, use a mirror, not a telescope.”

There is a way to criticise someone that allows the person being criticised to “save face” and to help that person become all he can be. This is called positive or constructive criticism and should be welcomed. On the other hand, negative criticisms are given by those who only care about how the actions of the person being criticised affect them or make them look. With negative critics you have to consider the source. These critics are usually very suppressive individuals who do not have your best interest at heart.

The key in giving criticism is to put it in a way that will show the person that you care about them and support them. Show respect and appreciation for what the person has done well in other areas.

It is not what you say that matters but how you say it. For example, you don’t want to say:

- *“I can’t believe you’d do something so stupid!”*
- *“The drawing is so awful that I can puke!”*

If you do, you run the risk of putting the other person on the defensive, and making it difficult or impossible for them to listen to you and take into consideration what you have to offer.

There are certain buzzwords and phrases that you need to use in order not to hurt the other person’s feelings and to allow them to save face. Examples of such key buzz words and phrases are:

- *“It may be in your best interest ...”*
- *“You may want to consider...”*
- *“May I suggest something to you?”*
- *“Please don’t feel offended, but it’s important that we put our egos into our back pockets and look at what happened objectively...”*
- *“I’m on your side, so don’t take what I’m about to say to you as critical ...”*
- *“I want you to know that I have your best interest at heart ...”*

Another problem with giving criticism is that people tell you what the problem is, but nobody gives you any alternatives. If you are going to criticise someone, you must give him or her alternatives along with the criticism. Example:

“I want you to know that ever since I knew you, I have had faith in your talent and abilities. So, I’d like to offer you some suggestions about last night’s performance. Your performance last night was not one of the best situations I have seen you in. It’s really important for you to maintain eye contact with the speaker...”

3.5 MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

There are some words that are termed “conversation killers” – once spoken, they will leave others groping for an appropriate response or, worse still, leave them in stunned silence. Similarly, certain words can be offensive or misunderstood, and using these words can diminish your professional image and credibility. It is best to avoid these:

Slang: “You’re my main man”, “creep”, “yucky”, “dude” – all these are too casual for a business setting. Avoid using nicknames like “slugger”, too!

Foul language: Even if we don’t use the actual word but a euphemism or abbreviation that conveys the same meaning, it reduces but does not diminish the offensiveness.

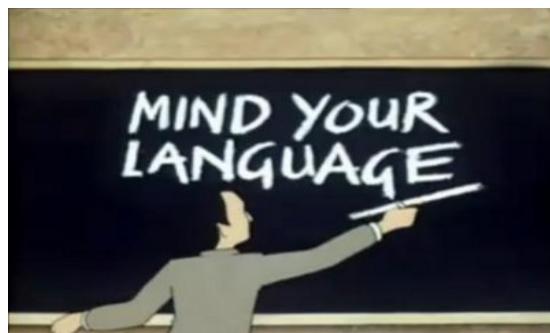
Jargon: “SOP”, “ORD” – such jargon excludes people.

Pretentious language: Boasting to impress or using over-complicated language should be avoided.

Sexist language: Words such as “babe” and “girl” to refer to a woman or “stud” to refer to a man draws attention to the gender rather than the individual. It may also land you in a legal hot soup.

Statements of disagreement that are rudely expressed: “You never do anything right!”, or “What a stupid idea!” can always be expressed without being disagreeable or insulting.

References to someone’s race, class, ethnic background, or disability: Such references have historically been used as a basis for discrimination, reinforcing an “us vs. them” mentality.



3.6 EXPRESS POLITENESS

“Kind words can be short & easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.”

Ever wondered how some people have such great people skills that they are able to “persuade” others to do things that they would otherwise not do? How about turning someone down so as to leave their egos intact? Or accepting an invitation without seeming too desperate? All these boil down to one thing: the art of being polite.

- **To include a third party in a conversation**

When a third person joins the conversation, try to draw him or her into the conversation by briefly mentioning the subject of discussion to the person, i.e. include the third person in the conversation. When in the company of others, avoid speaking about a mutual friend or a private matter of which the third party has no knowledge. Ignoring the presence of the person is bad manners.

- **To request someone to do something or suggest to her or him to do something**

Rather than sounding arrogant or giving a blunt order, use the following expressions such as “would you”, “could you”, “would you mind”, “I suggest”, “may I suggest”.

- “Would you please ask Mr Ng?”
- “Would you come this way, please?”
- “Would you mind waiting for a few minutes?”
- “May I suggest that you park over there? This is a no-parking zone.”
- “I suggest you ask the lady over there at Counter 1. She should be able to help you.”

- **To show the speaker’s involvement**

Sometimes it is helpful to use inclusive language, that is, include yourself in the task by using the pronoun “we” (for example, “Could we”) or expressions such as “I am pleased...”, “I hope...”, “I’d appreciate it...”, “I wonder whether...”

- “Could we take another look at the problem?”
- “I wonder whether we could check these figures again, Miss Ling?”
- “I’d appreciate it if we could complete the tender by tomorrow. The matter is rather urgent.”
- “I am pleased you enjoyed your stay with us.”
- “Thank you! I hope we’ll be seeing you again.”

- **To say ‘Yes’ politely**

There are many ways of saying “yes”. You can say a “yes” which sounds like a “maybe” (for example, “*I suppose so....*”, “*I suppose I have to....*”, “*Okay*”) or even a “no” (for example, “*Oh, all right ...*”, “*Must I?*”). Or you can say a “yes” that might sound a bit too ‘desperate’ (for example, “*Alright!*”, “*Wow, I thought you’d never ask!*”).

However, none of the above would be suitable in a more formal, polite situation. Depending on the situation or the intimacy level of the people involved (that is, how well you know the people), there are different ways to say “Yes” in a polite manner.

- **Saying ‘Yes’ to a request**

Sales supervisor to staff, Fiona:

“*We’ll be very busy with the late night shopping crowd. Would you mind staying back tonight, Fiona?*”

Fiona: “*I suppose so.*”

The supervisor would not be very pleased with Fiona’s reply despite the fact that Fiona agreed to stay behind. It was the way Fiona agreed that was wrong.

If one agrees to a request, then it has to be a willing agreement, not a reluctant one. For example, you should say:

- “*Yes, certainly, I’ll do it.*”
- “*Of course, I’ll help you.*”



- **Saying ‘Yes’ to an offer or invitation:**

Manager to a member of his staff:

“*I’m having a small party at my house tomorrow night. I hope you can come.*”

Staff Member: “*Okay.*”

This is hardly a suitable reply to a polite invitation. It would suggest that the staff member doesn’t particularly care to go but feels he has to. It would be a good gesture to thank the other person and then show one’s willingness to accept the offer or the invitation, e.g.

- “*Thank you very much; I’d love to come.*”
- “*Thank you very much; I’d love to have it.*”
- “*Yes, thank you, it’s nice of you to think of me.*”
- “*Yes, thank you. I’m looking forward to it.*”

- **To say ‘No’ politely**

Sometimes it is only inevitable that one must decline or say “no” to a person. Should such an occasion arise, it is important to try not to hurt the other person’s feelings too much. Therefore it is necessary to temper the negative reply in some way to make it appear less unpleasant. The best way to start is to avoid saying a blunt no. It would be much better to start with polite expressions such as:

- “*I’m sorry but...*”
- “*Unfortunately...*”
- “*Sorry, I can’t oblige you ...*”
- “*I can understand your feelings about this matter but...*”
- “*I appreciate your reasons for ... but ...*”

It is usually a good idea to give a valid reason for the refusal. One needs to give just enough detail to make the other person feel that one is genuine and that the reason is sufficient for the refusal. Example:

- “*I’m sorry David, but I can’t do it tonight. My sister is in hospital and I promised to look after her three little children.*”
- “*I’m afraid I won’t be able to come. It’s my parents’ 25th wedding anniversary and I’ve promised my sisters that I’ll organise it.*”

Sometimes, it is not necessary to give a reason for one’s refusal particularly so if one feels that the other person is pestering one or that the request is unreasonable. Example:

- “*I would love to go, but unfortunately I have a previous engagement which I cannot break.*”

