
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interpersonal Skills: A Gateway to Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal skills are one of the fundamental in demand soft skills in the 21st century. They are essential in that they have a great impact on one's creativity and team dynamics in the workplace, as they enable individuals to interact positively and work effectively with others. They help with the management of challenging interactions in a controlled and focused manner, and also with providing a lasting impact. Accordingly, the present paper aims at demonstrating how emotional intelligence can be promoted through interpersonal skills, specifically in the workplace. This will be exhibited by introducing the different communication styles out there (analyzer, driver, relater, and expresser), determining how one's communication style may be perceived and adapted as needed using words, tone, pace, and non-verbal cues, demonstrating active listening skills and questioning styles to explore issues and enhance understanding, behaving assertively, instead of aggressively, and stating one's view with increased confidence. Determining ways to build and maintain trust to increase influence, personal reputation and eminence, providing and receiving feedback effectively, identifying conflict responses styles, and recognizing when and how to use conflict resolution processes. Touching upon all these interpersonal aspects and working on developing them comes with a great deal of emotional monitoring, control, and professional success. At the workplace, it is important to not only excel at our work, but also pay attention to the way we approach our personal interactions, as they can be either deal makers or breakers.

KEYWORDS

Soft skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, professional success.

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1. Introduction

Communicating and interacting with others effectively and positively requires a great deal of skills and intentionality. Paying attention to how one manages their personal and professional interactions is crucial in achieving success at the workplace and elsewhere. Whether one is interacting with a colleague or a co-worker, being aware of the personal impact one executes and the effect one has during an interaction necessitates a big deal of skills, more specifically, interpersonal skills. The content shared in this paper is a summary of the information included in an online course entitled as "People and soft skills assessment: Developing interpersonal skills", through which some of the fundamental interpersonal skills out there will be introduced, and how the knowledge of which can contribute to development of one's emotional intelligence and skill to manage interactions better. We'll start by defining the different communication styles out there, followed by the tools needed to become a better communicator, after that we'll proceed to touch upon the art of listening, asking questions, and tools to avoiding communication barriers, to consequently exhibiting assertiveness and giving, receiving, and responding to feedback competently.

1.1 Communication styles

The communication process can be an ambiguous one in terms of what is being said and what is received. This ambiguity is influenced by one's perceptions, biases, and reactions. Avoiding confusion requires adjusting what you say and how you say it.

This is because different people have different communication styles. Depending on one's personality, many individuals might have distinct communication styles. In fact, most people have a preferred one. It is part of who we are. That's why, it is important to understand one's communication style and of the person we are communicating with, with the aim of improving the effectiveness and quality of the communication process taking place.

There are four communication styles:

- **Analyzers:** tend to communicate with facts. They ask questions and seek detailed information in order to make systematic decisions. They dislike making errors or being rushed into action unprepared or unorganized, and they rarely consider any problem too big to overcome.
- **Drivers:** use controlling and direct language. They like to take charge to get the job done in their own way with decisive, strong opinions. They are result oriented and want to be measured on the results they achieve. They like to be competitive, and they take risky situations.
- **Relaters:** incline to listen first and then connect with others. They are good listeners who seek harmony in the group, and value stability and acceptance. They highly value their relationships with associates as part of their overall measurement of success.
- **Expressers:** lean to sharing emotions. They easily express emotions and place high value on enjoying what they do and help others do the same. They are talkative, enjoy brainstorming, and often ask input from others. They dislike dealing with detailed, boring facts with too much information, and routine. They like new challenges and trying new ideas.

It is important to note that one might have a primary communication style but still have aspects of other aspects as well. The ultimate goal is to know one's style and the person whom you are communicating with and use such information to tailor the message to achieve obtain better understanding.

1.2 Elements for effective communication

When sending a message to others, it's not only about the words that are received, but also about paraverbal (tone, speed, and volume), and non-verbal (gestures, body language) aspects. Communicating, then, involves the combination of three elements: the words you use, your tone/ pace, and your body language. The 'Words you use' involve using few words as possible without impacting the meaning of what one is conveying; stating the message briefly and clearly by eliminating unnecessary words, avoiding absolute words as when used often people might perceive you as judgmental or critical making the person on the other end feel defensive and maybe stop listening. For instance, saying 'you *often* come late' instead of 'you *always* come late'. The 'tone and pace' at which one communicates; how you say something rather than what you say. A hurried pace can make the listener feel anxious and rushed, while a slower than normal pace can make them feel as though your message is not important. At the same time, focusing on intonation when you speak; raising or lowering your voice adds emphasis to an idea, pausing too; it's similar in written communication when we use bold, italics, or all capital. The 'nonverbal message of the body language' also adds a kind of content to the communication taking place. The management of one's facial expressions, maintaining eye contact, moving around the room when presenting, using hand gestures appropriately, while of course being sensitive to cultural constraints. We want one's words, voice, and body language to be consistent with each other, in addition to ensuring that the message doesn't get lost for cross cultural communication. Avoiding slang or jargon to make sure the meaning doesn't get lost, being careful with humor and cultural differences is also evident. As a way of illustration, it's better to ask one question at a time, instead of double questions (e.g. Do you want to carry on *or* shall we stop here?). Even virtually, there is a substitute for body language like using emoticons like speaking clearly, using phrases that describe your feelings and intentions, addressing the other person by name, listening without interrupting or multitasking.

1.3 The art of listening and asking questions

Successful communication not only involves presenting ideas in verbal and written form clearly, but also listening with focus. The receiving side of communication depends on many factors that can distort the message, such as concentration, empathy, and willingness to consider other points of view. There are five techniques to becoming an active listener:

- Giving our full attention to the speaker: facing the person we are listening to, avoiding multitasking, or using one's phone, reflecting on the meaning of the words said, setting aside any internal commentary, and trying to understand the meaning of the message both content and emotion wise.
- Paying attention to non-verbal messages: the speaker's tone and body language.
- Focusing on the total message: looking for connections between ideas the speaker is expressing, searching for 'big ideas', identifying a phrase that sums the entire message.
- Using empathy: considering the speaker's feelings by being non-judgmental or trivializing the speaker's issue.

- Asking questions: to demonstrate interest and clarifying understanding by engaging in a dialogue to deepen understanding.

There are two types of follow up questions to ask, namely 'close ended' and 'open ended' questions, and while the former can be answered with yes/no and used to finalize an idea or to confirm or refute a specific fact, the latter are used to engage in a deeper discussion, get more input, and share ideas. In fact, there are six probing questions that can help build a thorough understanding of a problem, situation, process, or whatever is to be learnt; *what* to probe for information, *why* to explore reason, *when* to clarify time and duration, *how* to reveal methods and instructions, *where* to specify location, and *who* to identify participants.

2. Communication channels and barriers

There are three main communication channels: written, verbal, and face to face. While written communication can be precise and thorough, verbal communication quick and convenient, and face to face communication containing emotional as well as factual information, these communication means also have some disadvantages to regard, making the choice for the best communication channel a hard one. For the written communication channel, the message might be scanned rather than well-read leading to the intent being misunderstood for instance, the humor might get misinterpreted and cause offense, and sometimes the message can easily be forwarded to others. Verbal communication channel has little to no documentation of what is being said, distractions might come into interplay, non-verbal signal are difficult to read, and controversial or bad news can't be discussed. Finally, face to face communication channel is time consuming and hard to plan and arrange, and the conversation might get sidetracked easily.

Therefore, in order to use these communication channels effectively, one needs to be mindful of some of the barriers to communication in general. Avoiding getting distracted by the speaker's communication style, appearance, or reputation, and rather focusing on the message. Trying to listen and putting aside any personal motives, interests, instead of bringing up another issue or focusing on what to ask before the speaker finished delivering the message. Stepping back and looking for key points conveyed and making a conscious effort to quiet one's emotional reaction to listen properly, alongside minimizing any distractions such as side conversations, or noise.

3. Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to express your rights and feelings in an open manner while respecting those of others and of yourself. It is often mistaken with aggressiveness as they both involve stating your needs, but they differ in the way it's done. It is important to behave in a manner that generates trust and respect, and behaving assertively, not aggressively, has a positive influence on people. There are different kinds of behavior one might face at the workplace: aggressive, passive aggressive, assertive, and passive.

- Assertive behavior: demonstrates confidence, honesty, and clear view of one's position. Assertive people behave calmly with no fear of not being heard and are in firm control of their emotions.
- Aggressive behavior: people with such behavior believe that their rights must be respected at any cost. They like to be in control, tend to speak loudly, and they can come off as rude or intimidating.
- Passive aggressive behavior: is a sneaky form of aggression. People with such behavior come across as dishonest and ambiguous, they conceal their feelings, but they secretly set traps and maneuvers behind the scenes to get their way to punish those who cross them.
- Passive behavior: such people often don't speak their minds and hardly ever stand up for themselves. It is often the outcome of people believing that other people's rights and views carry more weight than their own. They tend to fear confrontation and avoid risking their relationships. They rarely say 'no'.

Behaving assertively allows you to share your point of view without disrespecting others or undermining their point of view. It is a form of positive thinking where you can listen to other people's point of view, respect it and offer counterviews without upsetting anyone. It is an acquired quality, which can be developed through practice. It starts with being assertive in the way you speak like using 'I' statements, being direct and honest using neutral language, being respectful and balancing one's communication style not to be too aggressive or too passive, avoiding blaming others, and speaking with clarity and confidence. Alongside being assertive in your body language by trying to be calm rather than resentful, paying attention to your non-verbal cues and making sure they are in tune with your assertiveness, and being confident.

4. Conflict management and feedback

Workplace conflicts are opportunities to develop interpersonal skills. While some conflicts arise from interpersonal problems, others arise when people have different needs or goals or personality issues, and each requires different kinds of solutions. To resolve conflicts successfully, you need to demonstrate certain behaviors and use the right techniques for handling challenging

interactions. There is nothing wrong with articulating a position and defending it, but it is important to keep it constructive and open for others to share their opinions. There are five steps to dealing with conflicts:

- Analyze your feelings: identify what bothers you and try to understand the other side's position as well.
- Ask relevant questions: avoid biases, personal elements, or making false assumptions.
- Avoid generalizations: they can deviate your judgement.
- Avoid judgmental phrases: 'weak', 'too proud', it makes solving the problem rather a difficult one.
- Drop loaded action phrases: they can hamper the accuracy of your analysis. It is preferable to be less emotionally loaded when making a description of the problem.

However, knowing the different conflict response styles will not only help you to choose the best approach in challenging situations, but also changing one's instinctive reaction based on the situation you are in. There are five common conflict response styles:

- Competing: for them winning is the most important thing. It can feel aggressive. It can be used positively when in crisis situation and there is no time for diverse opinions.
- Collaborating: it is useful when you want to learn from others, merge different views, and gain consensus.
- Compromising: it involves meeting halfway especially when the conflict cost is higher than the cost of losing ground.
- Avoiding: it indicates a mindset like 'rather not deal with this'. It appropriate when the issue is not that important, and when dealing with the conflict will cause more damage than good.
- Accommodating: when one values the relationship more than their individual needs. It is like 'have it your way' mindset or orientation.

It is argued that collaboration is the preferred way to handle or solve a conflict. It is more difficult in that people will have to work together for a solution, but it is still better than compromising. It requires careful negotiation and development, and it is more time consuming. Yet, it gives all the parties involved what they really need making it a win-win solution.

After having a clear non-judgmental description of the problem the way one provides feedback can be a game changer. Feedback is a structured discussion in which you share an interpersonal problem with others in a way that makes it easier for them to hear you and work towards a solution. 'Positive-constructive' feedback is the most helpful form of feedback. It recognizes good actions and makes others appreciated and encourages them to repeat good actions and behaviors. It offers helpful suggestions and tells others what they can improve. The following steps describe some of the most entertained way to giving feedback:

- Asking for permission ('can I share feedback with you?')
- Pinpoint behavior and its result. Avoid being aggressive or defensive and be assertive.
- Pinpoint for the receiver to respond, but don't force a response. Keep a neutral expression. Let them choose to respond or not.
- Articulate the change you would like to see. Avoid using aggressive tone, and respectfully suggest a change of behavior.
- Explain the reason for that suggestion.
- Finally check for understanding.

Alternatively, how you accept feedback determines what you will take away from it. Avoiding anger, defensiveness, outright denial, blaming others, and shutting down is important, and just as there is a good process for giving feedback, there is also a good process for receiving feedback:

- Listen without interrupting or justifying
- Ask for clarification.
- Reflect on the message and restate what you understood from them.
- Thank the feedback giver.
- Take action.

5. Conclusion

Emotional intelligence describes the ability, capacity, skill, or self-perceived ability to identify, assess, and manage the emotions of oneself, of others, and of groups (Serrat, 2017). The process and outcome of emotional intelligence development also contain many elements, which seem to clash with those of interpersonal skills, such as: moderating conflicts; promoting understanding within relationships; and fostering stability, continuity, and harmony. Therefore, by developing interpersonal skills, individuals can

achieve a great deal of emotional intelligence and can become more productive and successful at what they do, and help others become so too.

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