2.5: Interpersonal Communication Skills

Learning Outcomes

1. Understand the skills associated with effective interpersonal skills.
2. Explain how to improve interpersonal skills.
3. Describe the principles of ethical communication.

In this chapter, we have learned about different aspects of interpersonal communication. Overall, some skills can make you a better interpersonal communicator. We will discuss each one in more detail below.

Listening Skills

The most important part of communication is not the actual talking, but the listening part. If you are not a good listener, then you will not be a good communicator. One must engage in mindful listening. Mindful listening is when you give careful and thoughtful attention to the messages that you receive. People will often listen mindfully to important messages or to people that matter most. Think about how happy you get when you are talking to someone you really love or maybe how you pay more attention to what a professor says if they tell you it will be on the exam. In each of these scenarios, you are giving the speaker your undivided attention. Most of our listening isn’t mindful, but there will be times where it will be important to listen to what others are telling us so that we can fulfill our personal and/or professional goals. We’ll discuss listening in more detail in Chapter 7.

People Skills

People skills are a set of characteristics that will help you interact well with others. These skills are most important in
group situations and where cooperation is needed. These skills can also relate to how you handle social situations. They can make a positive impact on career advancement but also in relationship development. One of the most essential people skills to have is the ability to understand people. Being able to feel empathy or sympathy to another person’s situation can go a long way. By putting yourself in other people’s shoes and understanding their hardships or differences, you can put things into perspective. It can help you build a stronger and better interpersonal relationship.

Emotional Intelligence

**Emotional intelligence** (EQ) is the ability to recognize your own emotions and the emotions of others. Emotionally intelligent people can label their feelings appropriately and use this information to guide their behavior. EQ is highly associated with the ability to empathize with others. Furthermore, EQ can help people connect interpersonally. Research has demonstrated that people with higher levels of EQ are more likely to succeed in the workplace and have better mental health. They are often better leaders and effective managers of conflict. We’ll discuss the idea of EQ in more detail in Chapter 3.

Appropriate Skill

Selection The best interpersonal communicators are the ones who can use the appropriate skill in certain contexts. For instance, if it is a somber event, then they might not laugh. Or if it is a joyful occasion, they might not cry hysterically, unless they are tears of joy. The best politicians can sense the audience and determine what skills would be appropriate for which occasion. We know that humor can be beneficial in certain situations. However, humor can also be inappropriate for certain people. It is essential to know what skill is appropriate to use and when it is necessary to use it.

Communicating Ethically

The last interpersonal skill involves communication ethics. We have seen several people in the business world that have gotten in trouble for not communicating ethically. It is important to be mindful of what you say to others. You do not want people to think you are deceptive or that you are lying to them. Trust is a hard thing to build. Yet, trust can be taken away from you very quickly. It is essential that every time you communicate, you should consider the ethics behind your words. As we will see throughout this book, words matter! So, what does it mean to communicate ethically interpersonally? Thankfully, the National Communication Association has created a general credo for ethical communication. The subheadings below represent the nine statements created by the National Communication Association to help guide conversations related to communication ethics.

We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.

The first statement in the credo for ethical communication is one that has taken on a lot more purpose in the past few years, being truthful. We live in a world where the blurring of fact and fiction, real-life and fantasy, truth and lies, real news and fake news, etc. has become increasingly blurry. The NCA credo argues that ethical communication should always strive towards truth and integrity. As such, it’s important to consider our interpersonal communication and ensure
We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.

You don’t have to agree with everyone. In fact, it’s perfectly appropriate to disagree with people and do so in a civilized manner. So much of our interpersonal communication in the 21st Century seems to have become about shouting, “I’m right, you’re wrong.” As such, it’s important to remember that it’s possible for many different vantage points to have equal value. From an ethical perspective, it’s very important to listen to others and not immediately start thinking about our comebacks or counter-arguments. When we’re only focused on our comebacks and counter-arguments, then we’re not listening effectively. Now, we are not arguing that people should have the right to their own set of facts. As we discussed in the previous statement, we believe in facts and think the idea of “alternative facts” is horrific. But often, people’s experiences in life lead them to different positions that can be equally valid.

We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.

Along with what was discussed in the previous statement, it’s important to approach our interpersonal interactions from a position of understanding and respect. Part of the mindfulness approach to interpersonal communication that we’ve advocated for in this book involves understanding and respect. Too many people in our world today immediately shut down others with whom they disagree without ever giving the other person a chance. We know that it can be tough to listen to messages that you strongly disagree with, but we can still disagree and, at the end of the day, respect each other.

We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and society.

As communication scholars, we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to improve their communication. One of the reasons we’ve written this book is because we believe that all students should have access to an interpersonal communication textbook that is free. Furthermore, we believe that everyone should have the opportunity to develop their interpersonal communication skills, listening skills, presentation skills, and social skills. Ultimately, developing communication skills helps people in their interpersonal relationships and makes them better people as a whole. According to Sherwyn Morreale, Joseph Valenzano, and Janessa Bauer:

Communication can help couples connect on a deeper level and feel more satisfied with their relationships. Additionally, competent communication strengthens bonds among family members and helps them cope with conflict and stressful situations. Communication gives family members the tools they need to express their feelings and address their concerns in a constructive way, which ultimately helps when conflicts and stressful situations arise… Better interpersonal communication can improve the social health of a community by strengthening relationships among various community members.36
We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.

As communicators, we need to take a two-pronged approach to our interpersonal interactions. First, we need to care about the needs of others. We need to understand that our communication can either build people up or tear them down. We should strive to build people up through our interactions with them. This doesn't mean that there aren’t times when you have to tell people that they’re wrong, but there are ways of doing this that correct people without attacking their self-esteem.

Second, we need to strive for mutual understanding. As we’ve learned in this chapter, a lot of things can make communication with each other very difficult. However, we should strive to ensure that our messages are interpreted correctly by others and that we’re interpreting others’ messages correctly as well. We should avoid jumping to conclusions and assuming that someone’s messages are always ill-intended.

We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.

We believe that any communication that degrades another person should be seen as reprehensible by everyone. For many of us, it’s easy for us to clearly label obvious hate messages as disgusting (e.g., anti-immigrant signs, burning crosses, racist graffiti). However, many people engage in biased language without really realizing that it’s happening. We’ll discuss the issue of biased language and how to avoid it in more detail in Chapter 4.

We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.

We live in a world where injustices are still very prevalent. From anti-immigrant rhetoric to laws preventing medical treatment for transgender people, we believe that it’s important for people to pursue fairness and justice in our world today. As such, all of us need to remember this when we are interacting with others. Whether it’s remembering to call someone by their preferred pronouns or supporting individuals seeking equal rights and protection under the law, we should help those individuals.

We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.

We live in a world where we faced with innumerable choices about the future. As I’m writing this, I’m currently in self-imposed quarantine during the coronavirus outbreak of Spring 2020. During this period, we’ve all become used to the term “social distancing,” or avoiding large crowds of people and keeping at least six feet from others in public. During this period, there are a lot of strong opinions and feelings on this subject. When it comes to our interpersonal interactions, it’s important for people to share information, opinions, and feelings and not have them immediately dismissed. Again, this is not to say that we believe that people should have the right to their own facts, but people should be allowed to express their own opinions and feelings.

In addition to sharing information, opinions, and feelings, it’s important to remember to respect people’s privacy and
confidentiality. Not everything we hear from another person is meant to be broadcast openly to the world. It’s important to remember not to tell other people’s business.

We accept responsibility for the short-and long-term consequences for our own communication and expect the same of others.

Lastly, the National Communication Association’s Credo for Ethical Communication advocates that people take responsibility for the consequences of their communication. If you say something that hurts someone else’s feelings, it’s important to recognize that and apologize. If we accidentally spread false information, it’s important to correct the facts when we learn them.

Rodrick Hart and Don Burks coined the term "rhetorical sensitivity" to help explain awareness of our own communicative behaviors. According to Hart and Burks,

The rhetorically sensitive person (a) tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition, (b) attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior, (c) is characteristically willing to undergo the strain of adaptation, (d) seeks to distinguish between all information and that information acceptable for communication, and (e) tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways.37

When it comes to the ethicality of our communicative choices, it’s important to be rhetorically sensitive to more fully understand the short- and long-term consequences that arise from our communicative behaviors.

Key Takeaways

- Skills associated with effective interpersonal communication are listening skills, people skills, emotional intelligence, appropriate skill selection, and ethical communication.
- Improving interpersonal communication skills requires practice and deliberate effort. The ability to identify problems and select appropriate communication skills is key to effective interpersonal communication.
- A set of principles guides ethical communication. These principles teach us that we must respect others, attempt to see the viewpoint of others, take responsibility for our communication, and make an effort to continually improve upon our skills.

Exercises

- Recall a situation in which you experienced conflict. Now that you know some approaches to effective interpersonal communication evaluate the experience your recalled and write down what you could have done differently.
- Recall a situation in which your confidence has been broken. In other words, you asked someone to keep a secret and they didn’t. How did this make you feel? In what situations is it acceptable to violate the confidence of another person?
- We all do something well in relation to communication. What are your best communication skills? In what areas would you like to improve?