

WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

Almost every problem, every conflict and every misunderstanding has at its most basic level an interpersonal communication problem.

So, what is interpersonal communication?

Think for a moment and write down the words that come to your mind when you think of interpersonal communication

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their thoughts on interpersonal communication.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IS HUMANITY'S GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT

Interpersonal communication is humanity's most important characteristic and its greatest accomplishment. It is humans ability to turn meaningless grunts into spoken and written words, through which they are able to make known their needs, wants, ideas and feelings.

Interpersonal Communication is a complex process that can be described in simplified terms by a Sender and a Receiver who exchange messages containing ideas and feelings, mixed together.

The Sender encodes the messages using *Verbal, Vocal and Visual* elements.

The words form the *Verbal* element.

The *Vocal* element includes the tone and intensity of our voice and the "music of our language".

The *Visual* element incorporates everything the Receiver can see. It might be a surprise to you but the Visual, non-verbal element is the most powerful element, grabbing and holding Receiver's attention. Vocal and Verbal elements follow.

The Receiver takes in the messages and decode them by sorting out and interpreting the elements according to their own experiences, beliefs and needs.

WHY DO WE NEED INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION?

We cannot be human alone.

We live in a world filled with other people.

We live together, work together and play together.

We need each other for security, comfort, friendship and love.

We need each other to mature through dialogue.

We need each other to achieve our goals and objectives.

None of these needs could be addressed without interpersonal communication.

We communicate in order to:

Get acquainted

Express emotions to others

Share information

Persuade others to understand our personal views

Build relationships

Interpersonal Communication is the lifeblood of every relationship. Good relations are nurtured by open, clear and sensitive communication.

We are able to send messages from the moon, but we find it difficult to relate to those we love.

Ineffective communication causes loneliness, conflicts, family problems, professional dissatisfactions, psychological stress, physical illness and even death, when communication breaks down.

Emperor Frederick, the 13th century ruler of the Holy Roman Empire wanted to know what language had been spoken at the birth of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Was it Hebrew, Greek or Latin? He ordered an experiment in which the original circumstances would be recreated as closely as possible. A group of infants were to be isolated from hearing human speech from the moment of birth until they spoke their language. The babies were to be raised by nurses who were strictly charged to maintain complete silence when with the babies. The result? Every one of the babies died. The lack of communication can be lethal.

From Robert Bolton, People Skills

CAN WE IMPROVE OUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

It would be a perfect world if communication would work as in the Science Fiction movie “Star Trek”, where Mr. Spock, by touching skulls, transferred information from one mind to another in a faultless process – free of errors, emotional content and personal perspectives.

Unfortunately in our world, mind melting is not available. We have to struggle with an imperfect system containing considerable opportunities for communication breakdowns.

Many people are fatalistic about their communication skills. We hope you are not one of those who tend to think that the way they talk and speak is a “given” like the color of their eyes.

We believe the opposite and hope to be able to persuade you that:
Everyone *can learn* to communicate more effectively
Everyone *can change*.

Actually change is inevitable, so everyone *will change*. People change continuously from infancy to old age. And the *law of change* says: “*Things do not stay the same. If they don’t get better, they get worse*”.

If the conflict does not decrease it will escalate.

If relationships do not get stronger, they will get weaker.

If the relations do not become closer, they will become more distant.

If the relations do not become more productive, they will become less productive.

It is important to have the communication skills to manage changes than to let them happen to you.

People who understand the communication process have more control over it and fewer breakdowns.

This handbook will help you foster the kinds of changes you desire by improving your understanding of the Interpersonal Communication process, focusing on:

- Communication Roadblocks
 - o The way our minds work
 - o Sender’s behaviors
 - o Receiver’s behaviors
- How to overcome Communication Roadblocks by
 - o Listening, Listening, Listening
 - o Reading, Reading, Reading body language
 - o Speaking
 - o Skill Training

COMUNICATION ROADBLOCKS

Understanding Problem Areas where Communication can break down

THE WAY OUR MINDS WORK

- **Perceptions of the reality**

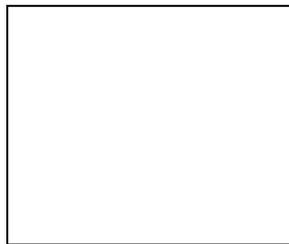
Perceptions are the way we interpret and understand the reality. Perceptions form *our reality* through the following steps:

We collect information

But:

- We collect only a small amount – we can not register all the data that our senses can bring us
- We collect selectively – we see what we want to see, we look for data to support our initial assumptions and neglect or do not notice contradictory evidence
- We collect in a certain order

The picture below is a well-known “ambiguous” picture. It can be seen as a young girl or as an old woman.



Hofstede describes how he showed half of a class a slightly altered version of the picture, for only five seconds, in which only the young girl could be seen. He then showed the remaining members of the class another version of the picture, again only for five seconds, in which only the old woman could be seen. After this preparation he showed the full ambiguous picture to everyone. The results were amazing. Most of those “conditioned” by seeing the old woman saw only the old woman and those “conditioned” by seeing the young girl saw only the young girl. He then asked each group to try to help the others to see what they saw until everyone saw both images. Each group get its views across the others with great difficulty and considerable complaints about each others stupidity.

From Charles B Handy, Understanding Organizations

We arrange the information into categories

Categorizing is very useful, being a way of organizing the chaotic reality to understand it.

But

Categorizing is dangerous, for with categories go a certain set of assumptions or predictions: “*Blonds are stupid*” “*Brown-skinned men are violent*” “*Old people are less ready to change*”. These are the stereotypes.

We form our reality

But

Each of us may have his/her own reality, very different perceptions and very different realities. These differences often cause misunderstandings and conflicts.

Have you ever heard about Red Riding Hood fairy tale? We suppose, yes.

Have you ever listened to the Wolf? We suppose, no.

Please take a moment to listen to him.

The forest was my home. I lived there and I cared about it. Then one day, while I was cleaning up some garbage a camper had left behind, I heard footsteps. I leaped behind a tree and saw a little girl coming down the trail carrying a basket. I was suspicious of her right away because she was dressed funny – all in red and with her head covered up so it seemed like she didn't want people to know who she was. Naturally I stopped to check her out. I asked who she was, where she was going, where she had come from, and all that. She turned up her nose and told me she was going to her grandmother house. As she walked down the path she took out a chocolate bar out of her basket and started to eat it, throwing the paper on the ground. Imagine that! Bad enough that she had come into my forest without permission and had been rude to me. Now she was littering my home. I decided to teach her a lesson.

I ran ahead to her grandmother's house. When I saw the old woman I realized I know her. Years before, I had helped her get rid of some rats in her house. When I explained what had happened she agreed to help me teach her granddaughter a lesson. She agreed to hide under the bed until I called her.

When the girl arrived I invited her into the bedroom where I was in the bed, dressed like her grandmother. The girl came in and the first thing she did was to say something nasty about my big ears. I've been insulted before so I made the best of it by suggesting that my big ears would help me to hear better. Then she made another nasty remark, this time about my bulging eyes. Since I try always to stay cool, I ignored her insult and told her my big eyes help me see better. But her next insult really got to me. She said something about my big teeth. At that point, I lost it. I just couldn't control my anger any longer. I jumped out of the bed and growled at her and said: "My teeth will help me eat you better".

No wolf would ever eat a little girl. I certainly didn't intend to eat her. She probably would have tasted bad anyway. All I wanted to do is to scare her a bit. But the crazy kid started running around the house screaming. I started chasing her, thinking that if I could catch her I might be able to calm her down.

All of a sudden the door came crashing open and a big lumberjack was standing there with an ax. I knew I was in trouble so I jumped out of the window and got out of there as fast as I could.

And that's not the end of it. The grandmother never did tell my side of the story. Before long the word got that I was mean and nasty. Now everyone avoids me. Maybe the little girl has lived happily ever after, but I haven't.

*From Resolving Conflict Creatively, Board of Education of the City of New York
A teaching guide for grades kindergarten through six*

- **Stereotypes and Prejudices**

Stereotype is a printing stamp, used to make multiple copies from a single mould. Walter Lippmann in his 1920 book “Public Opinion” used the term to describe the way people categorize – stamp – human beings with a set of characteristics.

Stereotyping is a natural function of the human mind, aimed to simplify the complex reality and make our body and mind develop automat responses to similar stimuli.

Stereotyping in social relations has a useful function by classifying individuals and helping us predict their behavior and plan our reactions.

But

Stereotyping is also dangerous. Cultural stereotypes frequently result from or lead to prejudices, negative opinions about others. Stereotypes and Prejudices are sources of communication failures, and more than that, of bad actions and ugly emotions. Prejudices based on the oversimplification of any race of people into narrow, negative stereotypes can have tragic consequences such as discrimination, violence and in extreme cases, genocide.

We often find people stereotyped around characteristics of:

- Age: *all teenagers love rock and roll and do not respect the elders*
- Sex: *men want just one thing from a woman*
- Race: *all Chinese people look alike*
- Religion: *all those belonging to Islam are terrorists*
- Vocation: *all lawyers are greedy*
- Nationality: *all Roma people are dirty*
- Places: *all people living in a certain city are lazy*
- Things: *all Swiss watches are perfect*

Stereotypes have four main characteristics⁶:

- They are more simple than the reality
- They are acquired from “cultural mediators” rather than own experience
- They are erroneous by their very nature
- They are resistant to change when absorbed in childhood, stubbornly coloring our perceptions and behavior.

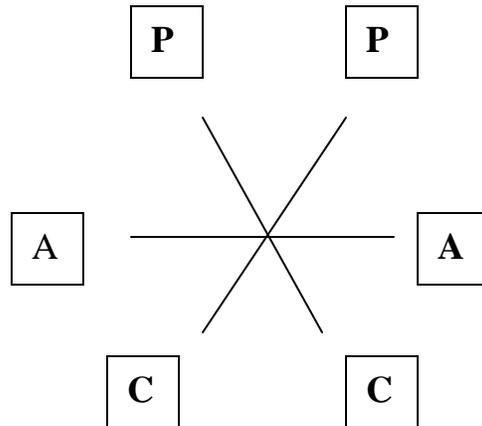
A traditional folk story from Vietnam explains us what is the difference between hell and heaven. In hell, people have chopsticks that are a yard long so that they cannot reach their mouths. In heaven, the chopsticks are the same length - but people all feed one another.

None of us can effectively respond to prejudices toward ourselves, but we can each intervene to help others.

⁶ Walter Lippmann

- **Perceptions of relationships**

We can perceive relationships with others based on three metaphorical roles: *parent, adult, and child.*



If one individual intends to relate to another as Adult to Adult, but is heard as Parent speaking to a Child, the interaction will result in misunderstanding and resentment.

When my friend asks me “Where did you put the book?” my reaction to her simple question will vary depending on which of the relationships seems to me to be operating. If I hear her speaking to me as a mother to a naughty child I might reply resentfully: “I haven’t the slightest idea, you read it yesterday!” If I hear her as an inefficient child looking for help, I could reply: “Don’t you know that the book is always in the library room?” If however, it’s Adult to Adult I might reply “I think I left it on my desk”

- **Perspective and metaperspective**

Laing identified three levels of thinking that complicate Interpersonal Communication:

Direct Perspective

John does not love Mary

Mary does not love John

Metaperspective

John thinks Mary loves him

Mary thinks John loves her

Metametaperspective

John thinks that Mary thinks he loves her Mary thinks that John thinks he loves her

Neither wants to hurt the other; rather than communicate openly and resolve the misunderstanding, they might well get married.

If this systematization seems complicated is nothing compared to the real life situations.

If one person thinks (falsely) that his colleague dislikes him he can easily behave in such way that the colleague begins to think that the person dislikes him. In this way they both are convinced of the other's dislike although everything is based only on their interpretation of their feelings.

When there is a cross-cultural communication these problems are more difficult to overcome. A type of behavior that means one thing to you may be interpreted quite differently by the other person, inducing a false metaperspective.

*We were negotiating with our French partners. The moment of agreement on intentions had arrived. The Frenchmen immediately pushed a document across the table asking us to sign our agreement to our stated intentions in quadruplicate. Reacting like typical Englishmen we regarded this request for signature at this stage as somehow reflecting on our integrity. After all we had **said** that we agreed to their suggested course of action and at this stage no legal documentation was necessary. Clearly the other side did not trust us. Angry, we replied that signatures were not necessary. So, thought the French, reared in a birocratic tradition, they will not sign. What does it mean? Clearly they do not trust us and want to retain room for manoeuvre. It is common practice to record the process of negotiations by signature at each stage.*

The meeting was rescued from this cross-cultural misperception only by the intervention of an American who was able to discern that cues were being misinterpreted.

From Charles B Handy, Understanding Organizations

- **Gender differences**

Allan and Barbara Pease describe, in their book “Why men don’t listen and women can’t read maps”, in a very funny way a very serious fact: the differences between men and women in the way they communicate. They demonstrate that the differences were forged by the functions men and women had for ages in their effort to survive: men were hunters, focused on their task; women were raising children focused on building and keeping relationships. As a result of these different functions their minds specialized and researches demonstrate:

Men minds have less speaking centers than women’s

Mothers, daughters and sisters will often speak on behalf of the men from their family:

Try to ask a small five year old boy “How are you” and his mother or sister will immediately answer on his behalf “Very well, thank you!”

For the same reason women talk more than men.

“Once I did not talk to my wife for six months – tells a man. I did not want to interrupt her”

A man speaks an average of 2000 to 4000 words/day, a third of the quantity spoken by a woman. This difference become visible at the day end, when man and woman eat together at home. He finished his words reserve; she still has a lot more. Listen to them, does it sound familiar?

Fiona: Hello darling. How happy I am to see you. How was your day?

Mike: OK

Fiona: Brian told me that today you have finalized the big contract with Peter. How did it go?

Mike: Excellent

Fiona: That’s fantastic. The guy seemed to be difficult. Do you think you can persuade him?

Mike: Yee

And so on...

From Alan and Barbara Pease, Why men don’t listen and women can’t read maps

Men interrupt each other when speaking only as a sign of rivalry or aggressiveness.

“Do not interrupt me” shout men to women, all over the world in all the languages.

Men statements include always solutions to the problems they are speaking about so they feel they have to speak without being interrupted. For a woman this is strange, because her main intention when speaking is to build relationships and less to solve problems.

Women can speak about many things at once; men like to concentrate only on one topic

When you speak with a man, speak simple and on one main subject. This is due to the fact that women can do more activities in parallel, such as listening, speaking about many subjects, and observing.

SENDER'S BEHAVIORS

- **Different meaning of the words**

Often we are not able to choose the right word to say precisely what we mean. The same word may have different meanings to different people

- **Hiding Thoughts and Feelings**

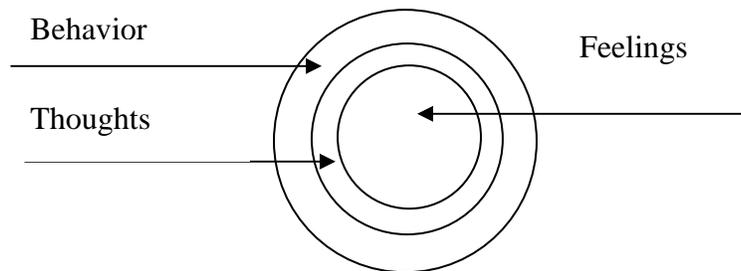
Just as military code messages for national security purposes, we may choose to code our messages for personal security purposes. Or because we have been trained from early childhood to express ourselves indirectly on many topics and feelings.

One of the basic reasons for miscommunication is that decoding is always guesswork.

We can easily observe a person's behavior, hear words and see actions

But

We can only imagine what the words and actions mean.



A person's thoughts and feelings (emotions) are often concealed very carefully and are not directly observable as behaviors are.

- **The Sender may be blind to her emotions or blinded by them**

Our emotions help shape our values. They are a fundamental part of our motivation and help to determine our direction and purpose in life. Emotions provide us with needed clues to solve our problems.

It is important not to be blind and to be able to recognize our feelings, to be aware of our rich inner world of emotions. This skill may overcome many communication failures.

Sometimes, instead of being blind to our emotions we are blinded by them. Feelings can block our rational capacity. We call it "Being in the grip of powerful emotions" When people are ruled by their emotions in such a way that neither reason nor willpower have any influence, they are apt to behave in ways detrimental to themselves and/or others. Effective communication can help.

RECEIVER'S BEHAVIORS

- **Hearing through own filters**

We have many filters that distort what we hear.

We have *attention filters* that keep us from being overwhelmed by the increasing amount of sounds and information.

We have *emotional filters* that block or distort our understanding.

We have our expectations of others that distort our behavior

- **Receivers are easily distracted**

Many Receivers are easily distracted and slip off dreaming while the Sender is talking.

One of the reasons for poor listening (and also for good listening) is that people can think much faster than they can talk. While we listen we have a lot of spare time for thinking.

The average rate for speech is 125-150 words per minute. This rate is slow for the ear and the brain, which can process about four times more and faster.

- **Reactions that block communication**

Often Receivers have ways of responding that are considered by researchers as *high – risk* responses that are likely to block communication, increase the emotional distance between people and decrease the other person's problem-solving efficiency.

These responses have been divided into three major categories:

Judging the other person

- **Criticizing**

Many of us feel we ought to be critical or the other person will never improve.

We feel it is our responsibility to make a negative evaluation of the other person's actions or attitudes

- **Name Calling**

There is no longer a person before us, only a type." You are just another insensitive male" Labeling, putting down the other person, prevents us from getting to really know the other

- **Diagnosing**

One person informs the other that she is being defensive, or she is acting out of guilt or fear or some other unconscious motive. "I can read you like a book....."

Communication is blocked.

Sending Solutions

- **Ordering**

An order is a solution sent coercively and backed by force. People become defensive and resentful, sabotage may result. Orders imply that the other's judgment is unsound and thus tend to undermine self-esteem.

- **Threatening**

A threat is a solution sent with an emphasis on punishment that will be forthcoming if the solution is not implemented. Threats produce the same kind of negative feelings and results that are produced by orders 'You will do it or else..'

- **Moralizing**

Many people like to back their solutions with the force of moral or theological authority. "It's the right thing to do" "You ought to tell him you are sorry"

Moralizing foster anxiety, arouses resentment and block honest self-expression.

- **Advising**

The advice-giving trap is a constant temptation when someone talks to you about her problems. What's wrong with the advice? Often it is seen by the other as a basic insult to her intelligence. It implies a lack of confidence in the capacity of the other person to cope with her problems. And the advisor seldom understands the full implications of the problem. The advisor may be unaware of the complexities, feelings, and many other factors that lie hidden beneath the surface.

Not knowing the question

It was easy for him

To give the answer

From Robert Bolton, People Skills, Dag Hammarskjold quotation

Avoiding the other's concerns

- **Diverting**

One of the most frequent ways of switching a conversation from the other's person concern to your own topic is called "diverting"

Diverting appears when people lack the awareness and skills to listen effectively.

At other times diversion appears when people are uncomfortable with the emotions stimulated by the conversation.

Logical argument

When persons are under stress or when there is conflict between people, providing logical solutions can be frustrating. Logic focuses on facts and typically avoids feelings. However, feelings may be the main issues. Using logic, even if really needed, may be a high risk response blocking communication.

HOW TO OVERCOME ROADBLOCKS

LISTENING, LISTENING, LISTENING

Since we have two ears and only one mouth listening might be the most important communication skill. This joke, as all, includes a lot of truth. We spend more time listening than doing anything else: a study showed that 70% of our waking time is spent in communication, and of that time writing is 9%, reading 16%, talking 30% and **listening 45%**.

Unfortunately few people are good listeners. Listening is more than merely hearing with our ears. Listening is a combination what another person says and involvement w with the other person who is talking.

Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding overcoming communication roadblocks. There are five levels of active listening¹:

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 contacts, saying “uh-huh”, “oh really”, “no-kidding”, ‘tell me more”, “I hear you”, “So..”, “I see”, “Yes”.

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 try to decode them (b) try to imagine what the speaker is feeling (c) decide what is the best answer

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.

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. It is also important to ask one question at a time.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing focuses on the speaker’s content, summarizing 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

¹ Jerry Wisinski, Resolving Conflicts on the Job, 1993

- (d) If the speaker indicates you misunderstood ask the speaker to repeat. “I am not understanding, could you say it again?”

There is one caution when using paraphrasing: do not overuse it!

Mirroring feelings

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 speaker to disclose feelings – may be joy, sorrow, frustration, anger or grief. The reflection of feelings will help the speaker understand own emotions and move toward a solution of the problem. In order to understand and mirror feelings:

- (a) Observe the feeling words the speaker uses.
- (b) If the speaker may not use feeling words at all - because suppression of feelings is so widespread in our culture, focus on the content and ask yourself: *If I were having that experience, if I were saying and doing those things what would I be feeling?*
- (c) Observe the body language, facial expressions, the tone of the voice, gestures and posture

Reflecting meanings

Once a person knows how to reflect feeling and content separately it is relatively easy to put the two together into a reflection of meaning. It would be useful to use the formula: “*You feel (insert the feeling word) because (insert the event or other content associated with the feeling)*”

- **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 summarization may help the speaker have a greater coherence, a better understanding of the situation and draw conclusions.

READING, READING, READING, BODY LANGUAGE

From the very beginning of the human race, non-verbal communication - body language, has been a mean of interpersonal communication and was used long before language appeared. But only in the recent past behavioral scientists started to make systematic observations of what non-verbal signs mean.

In a message, words are effective carriers of factual information. The content of the conversation can be important. But when emotions are engaged they should receive primary attention and they are mostly carried by non-verbal elements.

Understanding, being able to read body language is one of the most important skills for an effective communication. In order to do it:

Focus attention on the important clues:

The facial expression – especially eyes and vocal expression are eloquent

The tone of the voice gives information about speaker's feeling, anger, boredom, depression, enthusiasm or disbelief

The posture and gestures – movements of the head, legs, and hands reveal the levels of self-esteem and inner energy

The clothing and environment style give clues about personal characteristics

Note discrepancies

When there is a discrepancy between words and body language, both messages are important. Search for the meanings.

Be aware of your own feelings and bodily reactions

Non-verbal communications can by-pass the conscious mind and trigger responses.

By becoming aware of what your body is experiencing you become more sensitive to what other people are feeling.

Reflect the feelings back to the sender

Read non-verbal signs in the context. Sometimes body language is very clear and unambiguous, but at other times it can be difficult to decipher. But mastering the art and science of decoding the non-verbal signs can improve dramatically communication and overcome many obstacles.

SPEAKING

When sending a message as speakers you should

- Know what you mean and express it clearly, with respect and sensitivity.
- Check or build the common understanding of the words you use, because words can have different meanings for different people, especially if coming from different cultures and educational backgrounds
- Use de-escalatory language, resist the temptation to make personal attacks and accuse, by replacing accusatory “you” statements with less provocative “I” statements.

Do you observe the difference?

I feel as if I am not being understood.

You are not really listening to me!

You – statements tend to be perceived as blaming and attacking, manipulative and coercive, trying to change the other person’s behavior. They often provoke defensive reactions, as hostile counter-attacks or withdrawal from the conversation..

I - statements disclose your own experience without attacking others or criticizing them for not meeting your needs. They can halt the defensive and hostile escalation process, building trust and sensitivity. The basic assumption is that if people see who we really are, how we really feel and what we really need, they will tend to respond to us in an accommodating manner.²

- Try to understand your feelings, express emotions feelings and thoughts, through appropriate words and actions, through an assertive behavior.
- Perceive relations with the other person as between two Adults

² John Amodeo and Kris Wentworth, *Self-Revealing Communication: A Vital Bridge between Two Worlds*”, 1995

SKILL TRAINING

Skill-building training can improve communications abilities. Reading this handout may improve your understanding and knowledge of the main concepts. But only reading will not improve your communication skills.

You have to “learn by doing” in a skill building Training Program.

It is our experience that a high level of communication effectiveness can be reached only through intensive and well-designed training programs. We encourage you to be critical when selecting the communication training you want to attend. The training program should really address your needs through a demand-driven and client-centered design and delivery.

If you want to know more about our Training Programs that are designed to improve your communication skills described in this handbook please feel free to contact us at:

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