Social Skills in Interpersonal Communication

Owen Hargie, Christine Saunders and David Dickson


This book is a standard textbook for students of interpersonal communication. As such, it is perhaps not directly relevant to technical communicators, dealing primarily as it does with face-to-face, rather than written communication. However, there is plenty here for anyone who has to deal with other people in the course of their work, whether as interviewer or interviewee, manager or subordinate, or in countless other professional relationships.

The book is divided into 14 chapters, with the first two introducing the book and a skill-based model of communication and the last one containing brief concluding comments. Each of the intervening chapters deals with an aspect of interpersonal communication: non-verbal communication, rewarding and reinforcing, questioning, reflecting, set induction and closure, explanation, listening, self-disclosure, influencing, assertiveness, group interaction and leadership.

For most of its 300 pages of main text, this book succeeds in being very readable, even when presenting complex research findings. There is a good balance between theoretical and practical aspects of the subject, with plenty of examples of how different techniques can be used effectively in various situations. Many of the techniques can be used by the lay-person to improve interactions with other people and some – such as listening, questioning and reflecting – have particular resonance for technical communicators. We often need to interview subject-matter experts who do not find it easy to communicate their knowledge or are uncooperative for various reasons: improving our interpersonal skills is one way to achieve better results.

Anyone whose role includes managing people would certainly benefit from some of the insights in this book. In the last decade or two, companies have become aware that some key skills are never really taught and are addressing the resulting inadequacies themselves. A postal survey of 500 major US corporations in 1991 found that 59% of the 248 that responded were providing listening skills training and considered this an important aspect of staff development. It is not only important that we listen effectively but also that we signal our attentiveness to the speaker, providing encouragement (or reinforcement) to maintain and direct the communication.

This is an enlightening volume that covers a wide range of skills for everyday life, both at work and at home. In the introduction, the authors make the point that learning when to employ social behaviours is just as crucial as learning what they are and how to use them. This emphasis on acquiring practical competence in the skills described, not just theoretical familiarity, is reflected in the example-driven approach taken in the text. While true competence would undoubtedly require experience in both simulated and real situations, the reader can gain a good foundation for future experimentation merely through reading the text thoughtfully.

About the author

Hargie, Saunders and Dickson are all at the Department of Communication, University of Ulster. All have published other work on communication, mainly relating to the health and education sectors.