INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING SKILLS

- Societies are dependent on people and their constructive, functional and creative abilities. Modern organizations are characterized by work-force diversity, team work and cross-cultural adaptations. In view of this, the need for creating right climate for inter-personal relationships and fostering team spirit among employees is identified and various measures are initiated by corporate trainers. Accordingly, in the human resource development context, interpersonal relationships, group dynamics and team building have assumed great significance.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

- Interpersonal communication is the process of exchange of information, ideas and feelings between two or more people through verbal or non-verbal methods. It often includes face- to-face exchange of information, in a form of voice, facial expressions, body language and gestures. The level of one's interpersonal communication skills is measured through the effectiveness of transferring messages to others.

- Commonly used interpersonal communication within an organization include daily internal employee communication, client meetings, employee performance reviews and project discussions. In addition, online conversations today make a large portion of employees' interpersonal communication in the workplace. This communication occurs both verbally — with words — and non-verbally, encompassing facial expressions, gestures, body language, and tone of voice.

- In the workplace, interpersonal communication occurs in a variety of forms: in team meetings, on client calls, in memos and emails, during performance reviews, while giving employee feedback, and even casually over lunch or during watercooler chats.
- Our individual interpersonal communication skills have been in development since we began communicating as children, and these skills vary from person to person.

COMMUNICATION AND EMOTION

- Learning more about how to manage your emotions is a very effective way of improving your communication skills, whether you're speaking with your employees in a town hall presentation or responding to tough questions during a media interview.

- When a business leader lacks emotional intelligence, he or she becomes more easily flustered by unexpected questions, and more likely to say something that they cannot retract, thus finding themselves on the front page of The Wall Street Journal for all the wrong reasons. The problem is certainly not limited to media interviews. Leaders who have yet to develop sufficient emotional intelligence tend to react to situations without filtering their responses verbally and tonally; as well, they may exhibit inappropriate body language. Each of these responses can jeopardize relationships with employees, investors, and strategic business partners.

DEFINITION

- Interpersonal communication is the universal form of communication that takes place between two individuals. Since it is person-to-person contact, it includes everyday exchange that may be formal or informal and can take place anywhere by means of words, sounds, facial expression, gestures and postures.

- In interpersonal communication there is face-to-face interaction between two persons, that is, both are sending and receiving messages. This is an ideal and effective communication situation because you can get immediate feedback. You can clarify and emphasize many points through your expressions, gestures and voices. In interpersonal communication, therefore, it is possible to influence the other person and persuade him or her to accept your point of view. Since there is proximity between sender and receiver, interpersonal communication has emotional appeal too. It can motivate, encourage, and coordinate work more effectively then any other form of communication. Also, in a crisis, through interpersonal channel, flow of information is tremendous e.g. news of violence, famine or disaster.

- Interpersonal messages consist of meanings derived from personal observations and experiences. The process of translating thoughts into verbal and nonverbal messages increases the communicator’s self-concept. In fact, effective interpersonal communication helps both participants strengthen relationships through the sharing of meaning and emotions.

SIGNIFICANCE

- Interpersonal relationships are the basic unit of examination in promoting a climate of performance in the modern organizations. Whether one is engaged in a solo job or team work, he or she has to maintain constructive and productive relationships with peers, superiors and subordinates.

- Relationships can be formal and informal. Formal relationships are related to membership in an organization. They are official and bound by rules and regulations. They are expected to be goal and task oriented. Informal relationships on the other hand are based on ‘will and pleasure’ of an individual. They are personal and sustained as long as they are satisfying to the individuals.

Importance in Personal Life

- **1. Security:** A feeling of comfort and protection is found when associated with others. Family and Friendship groups provide a feeling of protection to individuals. In addition, membership in group insurance and other kind of schemes, provide financial security to individuals.
- **2. Self-esteem:** Relationships with eminent persons and membership in prestigious professional (All India Management Association), social (Rotary club) and cultural organizations (Karnataka Music Academy) help enhance the status of the individuals.

- **3. Affiliation:** The sense of belongingness and interactions that fulfil social needs are found in Family and Friendship groups.
- **4. Power:** The collective action enhances power of members. In union there is strength and power. Individuals join associations of student groups or employee unions.
- **5. Goal achievement:** Goals which cannot be accomplished individually necessitate association with other persons. Students form study groups and join training programmes to strengthen their learning opportunities. Networking leads to mutual support and help which is essential for rapid career progress.

ENHANCE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

- The global village is becoming a reality. In your current or future work, you may find that your employers, fellow employees, or your clients are from other countries. Learning about the power of culture and ethnocentrism helps avoid misunderstanding and friction in social relationships.

- **Differences** Culture is shaped by attitudes learned in childhood and later internalized in adulthood. Cultures are understood by considering the following variables.

- **Context:** Based on this variable, countries are classified as low context and high context cultures. Low context cultures (German and North American) tend to be highly logical, analytical and action oriented. They prefer linear communication. High context cultures (China, Japan and Arab countries) are more intuitive and contemplative. In high-context cultures, people prefer communication that is objective, direct and precise. They emphasize interpersonal relationships, nonverbal expressions, physical setting and social setting.

- **Individualism:** Members of low context cultures value individualism. They believe in individual action and personal responsibility. They believe that initiative and self-assertion result in personal achievement. High context cultures believe in collective processes. They encourage acceptance of group values, duties and decisions. Language reflects culture's basic value. For eg. In the US individual happiness is given importance, whereas in such group-oriented cultures as Japan, people strive for the good of the larger group. So in Japan the "we" always comes before "I".

- **Formality**: In some cultures formality is given more importance. Americans, for example, dress casually and are soon on first name basis with others. In business dealings they come to the point immediately. In Mexico, a typical business meeting begins with handshake, coffee, and an expensive conversation about the weather, sports, and other light topics.

- **Greeting:** Generally greeting behavior ranges from gentle, light, firm, single or double handshake. Australians do a hearty and firm handshake, while the French always do a gentle, light, single shake. In Latin and Mediterranean cultures, the greeting behavior of handshake includes hugs and shoulder pats. The Hindus greet namasthe, the Thai wai, and Laotion hop, all involve a palm-together praying motion. The Japanese greet with a bow. In Japan, it is extremely important to know the rank of the other person. This is because, the person of the lower rank bows first and lowest. The lower and longer one holds the bow position, the stronger is the indication of respect, gratitude, sincerity, and humility.

- **Proxemics:** The meaning we give to space also differs from one culture to the other. In general Americans feel comfortable in zero to 18 inches where they'll be greeting others (intimate zone), 18 inches to four feet while conversing with friends (personal zone), 4 to 12 feet while talking with strangers (social zone), and more than 12 feet while they are only a part of some public meeting or some common gathering (public zone). The British, may prefer more space for personal and social zones and might think it rude if anybody moves too close. Europeans tend to stand more closely with each other when talking, and are accustomed to smaller personal space. Those who are accustomed to more personal space may view attempts to get closer as pushy, disrespectful or aggressive.

- **Touch:** Generally, Asians, Chinese and Japanese are not a touch-oriented society. But it is common in the US. Successful executives must avoid using any gestures, which are considered rude or insulting. For instance, in Muslim cultures, the left hand is considered unclean. So, one should never touch, pass receive or eat with the left hand. Pointing the index finger is rude in countries like Sudan, Venezuela and Sri Lanka. The American circular “ok” gesture carries a vulgar meaning in Brazil, Paraguay, Singapore and Russia.

- **Communication style:** Americans take words literally. They value straight forwardness. Arabs speak with extravagant or poetic figures of speech. Germans tend to be direct but understated. Asian drags conversation.

- **Time orientation:** Americans are punctual. They are quick to respond in negotiation. Asians are not very punctual and take time in negotiations.
- **Avoiding ethnocentrism:** The belief in the superiority of one's own race is known as ethnocentrism, which may result in friction in interpersonal relationships. Japan is a country where women cover their mouths with their hands when they laugh so as not to expose their teeth. Exposing one's teeth is not only immodest but also aggressive. In Arab cultures, conversations are often held in close proximity, sometimes nose to nose. But in western cultures, if a person stands too close, one may react as if violated. In many Middle Eastern and some Asian cultures, same sex people may walk hand-in-hand in the street, but opposite sex people may not do.

CONCEPT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING SKILLS

- CONCEPT
- Listening is an active and attentive process of a receiver in the context of oral communication. In most of the cases, the target audience and characteristics are not properly identified by the speaker and as a result messages delivered are not heard with proper attention. In some cases, listeners develop their own barriers like preoccupation, lack of interest, poor listening skills and cause failure in communication. In fine, listening appears to be a challenging task and unless managers and employees are properly trained, communication problems develop in the organization.

What is listening? Is it synonymous with hearing?

- Communication experts distinguish the two terms by considering hearing as only a sensory and perceptual response while listening goes beyond it involving cognitive processes. Listening is an active process that involves steps like receiving, interpreting and understanding a message. Hearing is the receiving of sound and recognizing it. Listening involves much more than receiving message as it involves interpreting the meaning and trying to understand the message as expected by the speaker. Some of the interesting definitions of listening are as given under.

- **Wolvin and Coakley (1979) Observed:** Listening entails receiving, attending, and assigning meaning. Assimilation and accommodation help in assigning meaning.
- **According to Myers and Myers (1982) active listening can be explained as follows.** Active listening involves listening to a person without passing judgment, on what is being said, and to mirror back what has been said to indicate that you have understood, what feelings the speaker has put across.

The differences between listening and hearing can be summarized as follows.

- • Hearing is a passive activity. It does not require much attention. For example, while studying, students hear recorded music
- • Listening is an active process. It requires attention. It is the process of actively decoding and interpreting verbal messages. Thus, it requires information processing. Research indicates that humans have an amazing ability to guess and fill-in-the-blanks when they are unable to hear everything that is said.

SIGNIFICANCE

- The actual use of communication skills breaks down as follows: writing-9%, reading-16°/°, speaking- 30% and listening 45%. Weinrauch and Swanda, Jr (1975) found that employees spend on an average, more than 30 per cent of their time listening.
- Training can increase comprehension by 25 per cent or more. A Study conducted by Janusik & Wolvin (2006) taking a sample of 206 college students revealed that average hours in a day spent for communication total to 24.08 and50 per cent of them relate to listening.

TYPES OF LISTENING SKILLS

- Based on the attention and kind of participation listening can be classified as given under:

- • **Active or passive learning** Listening is a process of sensing, attending, understanding, evaluating and remembering or responding with a suitable action. At each stage, the process can be made effective if one possesses the right kind of skills. The work of Rogers points out a caution. According to him listening, first of all, reflects a whole orientation to life and people. It is a basic attitude about people rather than just a set of skills. **He further observes:** Naturally, listening is a skill and, for that reason, can be taught and improved. But unless a helping attitude is present, little success can be predicted from simple mastery of a set of how-to-do-its.

- **Appreciative Listening** When the receiver has appreciation to the speaker and or topic, listening becomes appreciative. Examples: Seminar by Foreign university counselors- it helps meet study aspirations of students. Talk by charismatic speakers like religious gurus, our favourite teachers, or entertainers.

- • **Empathetic Listening** Empathy refers to the ability of understanding others. When we empathise, we see from the point of view of others (positive cognitive response) and actually feel the way they feel (positive affective response). Listening of this type involves showing our concern, asking sensitively questions and encouraging self-disclosure. Examples: A sales manager adopts this approach of understanding needs of a client and tries to sell solutions; not simply products. A career counsellor listens and provides advice using this type of listening.

- • **Sympathetic Listening** This occurs when the receiver has real concern, affection and love towards speaker. Listener shows real concern, pays close attention, and expresses whole hearted support during interaction process. The process may lead to listener becoming speaker to offer counsel or support. Examples: In psychological counselling, clients' problems are heard and solutions are offered by the counselor. In appraisal sessions, supervisors listen to appraises and offer support to their development plants.

- • **Inattentive Listening** This kind of listening is also known as fake listening or pseudo listening. The receiver pretends listening. While not hearing anything that is being said, the listener gives an impression of listening by head nods, eye contact, smiles and appreciative or inquisitive phrases like I see and it so? Examples: Inattentive contexts may be: (i) Lectures in training sessions which are not interesting, (ii) A friend speaks to you and you are preoccupied.

BENEFITS OF LISTENING SKILLS

- Active listening is a difficult skill to master. Accomplish this, however, and you empower yourself to become more effective in your role, whether you're a leader or an aspiring leader, or operating in another professional capacity. Below we describe six different benefits of active listening and how they can help you in the workplace.

- **1. Active listening builds trust and strong relationships** Trust is a major commodity that active listening can help you establish. Consider your team's behaviours. Are they disengaging from what you're saying instead of paying attention to you? Are they absent from work more and more? Do they seem reluctant to share information with you? Do they rely excessively on email? These are all signs your team may not trust you. These behaviours can damage progress by fuelling resentment and lowering productivity. Your team members may not be feeling heard when they speak to you, in which case learning to listen actively creates the opportunity to re-establish trust and form healthier working relationships with your team.

- **2. Active listening can help you to resolve conflict** You can be sure of conflict in your workplace. People will misunderstand each other or hold different points of view. Active listening is crucial in these circumstances because often, we only see issues from our own perspective. Sometimes, we become so deeply entrenched in our own position that we don't even think about it from the other person's (or persons') perspective.

- **3. Active listening prevents you from missing important information** The focus of active listening on hearing the whole message means you're engaged on a higher level with the speaker, which allows you to absorb more specific details from the interaction. If you're receiving instructions or training, you'll be able to recall the details more easily. As a leader, you're likely to have to train others and convey messages to others, so it's important to remember details because others will be acting upon your words. If you've missed part of the original message, the recipients of your message will only hear parts of the original message, too. This could lead to misunderstandings and impact productivity, the quality of task execution or that of products themselves.

- **4. Active listening enables you to identify or anticipate problems** Active listening entails seeking clarification to ensure you correctly understand the speaker's message. This creates the opportunity to gauge whether a problem exists, or whether what they're telling you is a sign that a problem could surface, and devise a strategy to address the issue. Importantly, you're allowing yourself to develop an entire sense of the problem and evaluate all the different aspects, based on the details you hear. This can help you to discover a potentially underlying problem and tackle an issue at its very root, instead of merely curing symptoms and then seeing the problem re-emerge later.

- **5. Active listening helps you to build more knowledge** Leaders should always embrace learning, and active listening is a powerful skill that supports learning so you can carry your organisation forward. Focusing more intensely makes it possible to assimilate information and understand different topics better, and to then remember more details from what you've learnt.

- **6. Active listening empowers you as a leader** Active listening is empowering, and empowerment builds confidence. By listening actively, you gain an understanding of what will be beneficial in the workplace, which expands your perspective and empowers you. You'll become more aware of what's happening in your workplace, and you'll communicate with superiors and subordinates much better. All of this paves the way for you to lead with confidence.

Thank you

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