



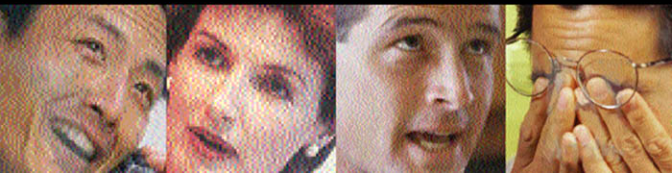
# PeopleSmart

Developing Your Interpersonal Intelligence

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Author of the bestselling *Active Training*

**with Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.**



An Excerpt From

*PeopleSmart:  
Developing Your Interpersonal Intelligence*

by Mel Silberman, Ph.D. and Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.  
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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# Preface

*Are you less successful at times than you ought to be, given your intelligence and work ethic?*

*Do you reach out to others on the job or at home but your efforts are sometimes rejected?*

*Is your energy drained by conflicts with certain individuals?*

*Do you wish your relationships with people close to you were more harmonious and fulfilling?*

People**Smart** is a book for those who ask themselves these questions, which means most of us at some time or other, with a supervisor, coworkers, teammates, clients, spouse, partner, children, relatives, or friends. The aim of People**Smart** is to give you a *one-stop*, all-in-one guide to healthier and more productive relationships. It saves you the time of reading a library full of self-help books on listening, communication, assertiveness, feedback, influence, conflict resolution, collaboration, and flexibility.

That's not to say that you should ignore the many wonderful books that exist on these subjects. (You will find just a brief sample in the *References*.) But, if you are short on time, you will find

People**Smart** to be a concise collection of the wisdom that I have culled from 40 years of reading and reflecting on my own life. (The first 18 years of my life I was too busy playing at life to get anything from reading and reflecting about it.)

People**Smart** was also written with the idea that there is more to developing your interpersonal effectiveness than just *reading* and *reflecting* about it. A Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu (6th century BC), said: “If you tell me, I will listen. If you show me, I will see. If you let me experience, I will learn.” People**Smart** is a book designed for *experiencing*. Becoming effective with people is a life-long challenge. Each decade presents unique opportunities to get good at it. But only if you do it!

Of course, none of us do anything unless we really want to. I hope that People**Smart** will inspire you to work at becoming interpersonally fit in the same way as you would work at becoming physically fit. And I want to be your personal trainer.

How did I get the nerve to apply for the job? Three big reasons come to mind.

1. I've been a psychologist for over 30 years. In the past 10 years, I have focused exclusively on developing practical ways to facilitate professional and personal development for adult learners. My guiding philosophy has been called active training.

When training is active, you, not the trainer, do most of the work. You use your brain—studying ideas, solving problems, and applying what you learn. The adult trainer's job is to steer you in the right direction, give you enough basics to get you started, and gently push you to explore on your own. That's what I'm prepared to do.

I've also found that people do not actively develop skills unless they are usable. I know how often I felt that the advice

I read in self-help books seemed impossible and inappropriate. I'm prepared to give you advice you can use immediately. I'll also help you fight the tendency to go right back to your accustomed, but perhaps unproductive, ways of handling people.

2. I am a survivor of lung cancer. During my two-year battle with this illness, I learned that you can't face cancer and fight it without the love, support, feedback, and prayers of others. Of course, the blessing of your family and closest friends is paramount. I am especially blessed with a loving wife of 36 years, Shoshana, who has been my steadfast life partner through times of joy and anguish. But, also knowing that everyone you knew who knew you had cancer was rooting for you was an additional gift you can never fully appreciate until it happens. Next to faith in God, I came to the conclusion that the best source to place your faith is in other people. That assumes, however, that you have invested enough in your relationships with people to reap the dividends. Luckily, I was taught to invest in people. Now, I want more than ever to teach that lesson to anyone who wants to profit from it.
3. I did not write **PeopleSmart** alone. I am fortunate that Freda Hansburg agreed to assist me in the writing of this book. Freda is a superb psychologist, trainer, and writer. Her insights and common sense have shaped the advice contained in **PeopleSmart** from beginning to end. You will enjoy your interpersonal workout a lot more because Freda had a major role in creating it.

Will you let me be your trainer?

Mel Silberman  
Princeton, NJ  
May 2000

# What Does It Mean to Be People Smart?

Check off the “people” activities below that apply to you:

- supervising employees
- parenting children (and one’s parents)
- working on a team
- being in a committed relationship
- dealing with your boss
- participating in religious or community groups
- helping others understand how to do something
- coping as a consumer
- obtaining business
- interviewing others or being interviewed
- relating to doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals
- selling to a customer
- attending a party
- networking
- interacting with coworkers or classmates
- chatting on the Internet

Chances are you checked several of these items. It used to be said that some of us were in the business of working with people



and some of us were in the business of working with facts, figures, and machinery. This distinction was probably never accurate, but its inaccuracy is now beyond dispute: Good people skills are a must for any job, including technical ones. Our lives at home also demand superior people skills as we try to juggle new roles and new living conditions. The people business is no longer the domain of the few. It includes you and everyone you know.

The twenty-first century will feature a rapidly changing and highly interrelated world. You will probably accomplish very little on your own, but with other people you may be able to accomplish a lot. Increasingly, success will depend on being people smart.

Ask the person on the street what it means to be people smart, and you may get an answer such as, “Oh, that’s a person who is really a smooth operator . . . a person who knows how to get others to join his side.” A second person might answer, “someone who is personable, friendly, fun to be with.” While few people would complain about having those two attributes, they represent a very limited view of what it means to be gifted with people. Being people smart is a multifaceted intelligence, not limited to your political skills or your social graces but including a wide range of interpersonal abilities. Being people smart means that you are good at eight skills:

### People**Smart Skill 1**

## Understanding People

How well you understand others has considerable impact on how successful you will be in every arena. People who understand others communicate more effectively, influence what others think and do, and resolve conflicts in a healthy manner. To discover what

makes people tick, you must learn to listen actively, empathize, and acknowledge other viewpoints. You need to know how to ask questions that clarify what a person is trying to say. Understanding people means going beyond the words they speak and learning how to interpret the unspoken. You must also know how to read other people's styles and motives so that you can work with them effectively.

People**Smart Skill 2**

## Expressing Yourself Clearly

Being people smart means knowing how to get your message across. Expressing yourself clearly is important to any relationship, personal or business. When you go on and on to make a point, you don't get the results you want. You must know how to get to the point when brevity is required, yet provide enough details so that you don't confuse people. And it's important to say things so that your words are memorable. You must also sense when the other person can help you be clearer by checking understanding of what you've said.

People**Smart Skill 3**

## Asserting Your Needs

In order to be people smart, you've got to be your own person. You have to have limits and you have to establish those limits. If you try to be all things to all people, you'll wind up disappointing them. You also need to be straightforward with your wishes. Hinting at what you need from others only leads to disappointment and frustration. Once that happens, you often become angry at others and lose the calm and confidence you need to be at your best.

People**Smart Skill 4**

## Exchanging Feedback

Being people smart means having the ability to give feedback easily and do it without giving offense. The feedback you provide must be descriptive, concrete, and intended to be helpful. It should also be well timed, nonblaming, and practical. It's also smart to get in the habit of asking for feedback as well as giving it. If feedback is withheld from you, it's as though you have blinders on. Without feedback, you're always left wondering what the other person is thinking about you. To encourage others to respond to your requests for feedback, you must give them time to organize and express their thoughts, and you must listen to what they're saying with an open mind.

People**Smart Skill 5**

## Influencing Others

The people smart person is able to motivate others to action. To be in a more commanding position to influence others, you must become the kind of person who is able to connect with others, unearth their needs, and link them in an effective way to what you have to offer to them. You must also know how to reduce resistance to change and how to make persuasive appeals.

People**Smart Skill 6**

## Resolving Conflict

The previous five skills become especially valuable when the situation is taking place in a tense arena. When emotions are running high, all the previous skills must come to the fore and some new

skills come into play as well. Interpersonally brilliant people are exceptional conflict resolvers. The key to a person's ability to be a conflict resolver is to know how to get the subject right out on the surface. That's hard if you're scared or anxious. The other person may also be scared or anxious, and maybe even explosive. Besides getting the problem on the table, you must figure out what's bothering you and what's bothering the other person and be able to suggest creative solutions.

People**Smart Skill 7**

## Being a Team Player

A person's ability to be interpersonally intelligent is really challenged when it comes to teamwork. All of us are involved in some kind of teamwork, whether at work, with another parent, in a neighborhood group, or in a service organization. Being a part of a team is challenging because you have less personal control over the outcome than you might have in a one-to-one relationship. It's often frustrating since you have fewer opportunities to get your point across and persuade others. Working in a team takes special skills, such as complementing the styles of the others, coordinating the efforts of team members without bossing them around, and building consensus.

People**Smart Skill 8**

## Shifting Gears

Finally, people who are interpersonally adept are flexible and resilient; they understand that there are different strokes for different folks. One of the ways you can get a stuck relationship to change is to change the way you act in it. People who are

successful in improving relationships are people who can get out of ruts and habits, even if they are helpful in some situations, and do things that are new and different. That's risky, so it's important to know how to avoid sticking your neck out too far.

These eight ways to be people smart give you the tools you'll need to establish and maintain strong relationships with everyone with whom you come into contact—from the perfect stranger to your most intimate partner. You will discover that these eight aspects of interpersonal intelligence fit together almost like a child's building blocks, each one offering a firm foundation for the next. Developing skill in one area also brings benefits in other areas. You'll come to think of these integrated abilities as keys for repairing and developing relationships that haven't always reached the levels you would like.

As you develop these skills, you will discover that many benefits follow:

**When you understand someone else, you are appreciated.** We like people who take time to understand what we think and feel. Being listened to and understood makes people feel more important and reassured.

**When you explain yourself clearly, you are understood.** If you can make your point clearly the first time, there may be less confusion to sort out later. This could help things go more smoothly at work, decrease misunderstandings at home, and save you time and energy.

**When you assert yourself, you are respected.** People respect individuals who are forthright. When you are straightforward, other people will admire your courage and personal strength. Your quiet firmness also goes a long way toward influencing others to honor your needs.

**When you exchange feedback, you are enlightened.** When you seek feedback, you discover the impact of your behavior on others. When you give feedback to others, you learn whether your views are on target. In the exchange, your relationships with others become fuller and more meaningful.

**When you influence others positively, you are valued.** Lots of people give advice, but people will welcome your advice only if you do it in a constructive manner. Your counsel will be sought because it is sincere, compelling, and helpful.

**When you resolve conflict effectively, you are trusted.** If you are soft on people and tough on issues, you don't bruise egos or make enemies. That inspires others to negotiate fairly.

**When you collaborate with teammates, you are prized.** People with good team skills are the employees most employers covet. You will be given more responsibility and greater rewards if you are a team player.

**When you shift gears, your relationships are renewed.** That's because a change in *your* behavior is often the catalyst for a change in the *other person's* behavior. You create the opportunity for problem relationships to be mended.

In short, you will find that it is *smart* to become people smart. What will it take to become more people smart? Let's find out. . . .

# Becoming People Smart

While some kinds of abilities remain stable or even decline as you age, your ability to be people smart can grow continuously. That's the good news. The bad news is, it won't be easy. We adults are often not open to change. If you don't believe this, try this simple experiment:

*Fold your arms without thinking. Now, fold them the opposite way so that you switch which arm is on top. Feel awkward? You bet. Well, stay that way for a minute. Now, cross your legs without thinking about it. Yep, the upper part of your body is still uncomfortable but your lower part is nice and comfortable. Now cross your legs the opposite way. Your whole body is now out of your comfort zone. Now go back to the way you normally fold your arms and cross your legs. Feel better? That's the real you. It's comfortable to do things in familiar ways.*

For better or worse, we have gotten used not only to folding our arms and crossing our legs in certain ways, but to relating to other people in certain ways. And it will be uncomfortable to change.

By the time we are grown up, we have tried many times to change some things in our lives and haven't succeeded. After all, look at how many times most of us have failed to lose weight, exercise regularly, spend more quality time with loved ones, donate

blood, or do a host of other things we know are important. We undoubtedly have failed to keep New Year's resolutions so many times that we've lost count.

Perhaps our most stubborn source of resistance to change comes from the fact that, by now, we have a highly developed interpersonal style. The temperament with which we were born, the environments to which we've been exposed, and the relationships we have formed all contributed to the creation of a preferred way to relate to others. This style is so dominant that it will probably not change dramatically for the rest of our lives. Our social style develops around two core issues:

*How we respond to others:* When doing something with others, whether support, work, sex, or whatever, do we focus more on the activity itself or the person with whom we are doing the activity? Some of us are extroverted while others of us are more self-contained.

*How we pursue our needs:* Do we press our needs, (take initiative) or wait to consider the needs of others? Some of us are forceful while others are patient.

Where we fall with regard to these two core issues goes a long way in determining how we relate to others. Because our style is somewhat set, no one should expect or desire a radical change. But we can look ourselves in the mirror, take pride in our strengths and take stock of our weaknesses, and look for ways to work with and around them.

Think of getting interpersonally fit just as you would think of getting physically fit. While your body type, genetic makeup, and age limit the physical prowess you can achieve, you can still become much more physically fit than you presently are. The same thing is true of interpersonal fitness.



In People**Smart**, you will find a four-step process for boosting your interpersonal intelligence that is realistic and doable.

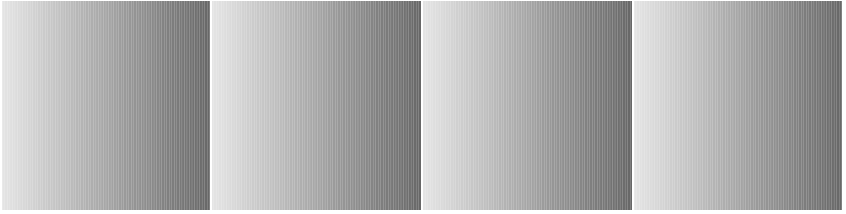
- 1. You've got to WANT IT.** Since changing long-standing habits won't come easily, you have to pay special attention to motivation. You are more likely to be motivated if you are aware of when and where you need the skill the most. To help you make this connection, we will provide you with a list of situations where you might find the skill in question to be particularly relevant in your life at the moment. Choose a situation or two in which you want to excel and focus on them.
- 2. You've got to LEARN IT.** Interpersonally intelligent people do certain things very well. Become familiar with the skills possessed by people who exemplify each of the eight People**Smart** skills. While you don't need a whole course in each area to make some changes, it is important to acquire a few basics. Even if you are familiar with this material, we urge you to review it.
- 3. You've got to TRY IT.** Reading about what others do well will not suffice—you must do it yourself. With each aspect of interpersonal intelligence, we will encourage you to conduct an “experiment in change.” These experiments will allow you to try on a small change in behavior for size. You will test your wings and may find the initial success necessary to sustain further practice
- 4. You've got to LIVE IT.** One of the reasons that changes don't last is that after people get pumped up about doing something, they try to make it on sheer inspiration and willpower. They may make some headway but then quickly relapse. Real change comes only by overcoming obstacles that are in the

way in our daily life. We will help you to confront *your* difficulties with each People**Smart** skill. The skill may be difficult for you for reasons that are different than for someone else. If you face the reasons the skill is difficult for *you*, you will be more likely to incorporate the skill into your life.

If you think about it, these four steps apply to any area of self-improvement. For example, assume you are overweight. Even if you admit it to yourself, you really have to **want** to do something about it—especially if you love to eat. Therefore, it may prove necessary to increase your motivation by thinking about specific situations in which you want to enjoy the benefits of being lighter. Next, you might find it helpful to **learn** about the latest diets, ways to lose calories through exercise, and psychological tips to modify your eating behavior. When you decide to **try** something different, it will feel like an “experiment in change.” If the experiment is successful, you may be able to build the approach you have been employing into your lifestyle. You will start to **live** it. Along the way, there will be plenty of obstacles to identify and find ways to overcome. If you do, the weight lost will stay off.

These four steps—*want it, learn it, try it, and live it*—are especially important when you are seeking changes in your interpersonal effectiveness. You cannot develop your people smarts merely by osmosis.

Before you begin the process of changing, it makes sense to take stock of your current effectiveness. How people smart are you?



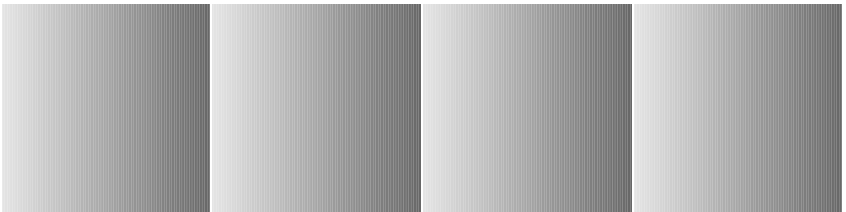
People**Smart Skill 1**

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# Understanding People

*You can see a lot, just by listening.*

—YOGI BERRA



The existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, observed that hell is other people! We agree in one sense. If understanding others were an easy proposition, people wouldn't have so many idiomatic expressions to express its difficulty:

*"I just can't get inside his head."*

*"I don't get where she's coming from."*

*"I don't know what makes him tick."*

*"I just don't have her number."*

*"She's a tough nut to crack."*

*"I can't relate to him at all."*

*"She's a mystery to me."*

Despite the challenge, trying to understand others is the cornerstone of interpersonal intelligence. When you don't understand other people, you can't influence, collaborate, or resolve conflicts with them. On the other hand, when you do understand how others think, feel, and perceive—when you can see through their eyes—all kinds of connection are possible:

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Consider the case of a busy patent attorney we'll call Larry. He's not a bad guy, but sometimes he's a bad listener and doesn't tune in to others well. Larry puts in long hours and is usually drained when he finally gets home at the end of the day. A typical evening conversation between Larry and his wife, Laura, goes something like this:

*Laura: Hi, dear. How was your day?*

*Larry: Huh? Oh, okay. How are you?*

*Laura: Well, all right. Actually, I'm really worried about the presentation I have to give tomorrow.*

*Larry: (Opening newspaper) So, what's for dinner?*

*Laura: (Sighs) There's some spaghetti I can zap . . . want some?*

*Larry: Sure. So, how are you?*

*Laura: (Sounding annoyed) I told you . . . I'm very anxious about my presentation. My client's new marketing director is coming to the meeting and I've heard he's been supercritical with the other account execs.*

*Larry: Oh, I wouldn't worry.*

*Laura: Well I am worried! I've changed the approach for the ad campaign three times already, and I . . .*

*Larry: (Interrupting) It'll be fine.*

*Laura: No, but . . .*

*Larry: You always do okay. Say, we got a favorable decision on the Vector opposition in Europe. So now the client wants to provoke an interference in the U.S. counterpart patent after all, because . . .*

*Laura: (Slamming down plate) Here's your pasta!*

*Larry: . . . we can move for invalidity on the prior art we discovered without a presumption of validity going for them. (Puts down paper) So, how was your day? Laura? (Notices she's left) I'll never understand that woman!*

Compare Larry to Pete. Pete is a doctor who conveys to his patients that they are the only important people in his life at the moment he is seeing them, even though he's got a packed waiting room. How does he do it? For starters, his staff is instructed not to interrupt patient visits except when there is an emergency. He listens to them as they tell their problems in detail and uses paraphrasing to show that he understands. Dr. Pete used to think that

as soon as he heard enough to make a diagnosis it was expedient to interrupt the patient and make his recommendations. However, he has learned over the years that cutting people off too soon often leads to a misdiagnosis. He's also noticed that when patients feel listened to, they are more informative.

Dr. Pete has also learned that people may have their own reasons for not following through with his treatment recommendations. They may have fears or misinformation or cultural injunctions against following some of his instructions. So he tries to delve below the surface to understand their feelings and opinions. He also watches for important clues about people's concerns by paying attention to their body language. Knowing that each patient is unique, he evaluates his patients' needs, values, and personalities to better tailor their treatment to their temperaments. It may seem to take longer this way, but invariably he ends up saving time and achieving better outcomes in the long run.

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In this chapter, we will show you how Dr. Pete and other people-gifted individuals are successful in understanding other people. Before we get to that, we would like you to think about your motivation to begin a workout program in this vital area of interpersonal intelligence.

**“Want It”**  
Motivating Yourself to Be  
More Understanding of Others

One way to show yourself that you are serious about understanding people better is to choose a specific place to begin. Ask your-

self *when* you want to understand someone better. Check the situations below that apply for you:

**On the job:**

- When you are interviewing a job applicant.
- When someone on your staff is less cooperative than usual.
- When your boss has expectations that don't make sense to you.
- When a client tells you he dislikes your proposal.
- When your secretary says she feels overwhelmed.
- When a colleague's suggestion doesn't make sense.
- When a coworker's ideas are confusing.
- When a customer has a complaint.

**On the home front:**

- When your partner seems on edge.
- When your child is irritable.
- When your child's teacher calls about your child's behavior in school.
- When your best friend is angry at you.
- When your partner seems despondent for no apparent reason.
- When your son complains that kids at school are picking on him.
- When your mother complains about something that seems very petty.
- When your teenage daughter stops talking to you.

When you want to make changes, set small, realistic goals. Don't attempt to understand effectively 100% of the time,

everywhere, with everyone. Instead, think about the where, when, and who of your own life situations and pick a starting point. Don't begin with your most difficult scenario. You can work up to that. Look for people and circumstances you encounter regularly and where you have the motivation to handle those encounters differently.

## **Learn It**

### Three Ways to Understand People Better

Interpersonally intelligent people, those with high PQs, see understanding as an active process. They know that it takes deliberate effort and requires them to use their eyes, ears, voices, brains, and bodies. In a nutshell, here is how they do it: they **listen** and **observe** in order to take in words and body language; they **clarify the meaning** of what they hear by asking open-ended questions and responding to others' feelings and perceptions; and they **interpret behavior** in order to identify the motivation behind people's actions. Let's examine each of these skills in more detail.

#### **1. Listening and Observing**

It goes without saying that the most direct way to understand people is to really listen to their ideas and feelings and attend to their body language. When you are absorbed by an entertaining movie or suspenseful novel, attending is easy. However, if you have to sit through a long, boring speech, you know it can be a real chore.

Often, you will need to make a conscious decision and effort to listen and observe carefully, which is why we describe it as an active process. The key steps involved are to *put the speaker in the spotlight*, *show interest*, and *read body language*.



### **Put the Speaker in the Spotlight**

The Greek philosopher Zeno stated: “We have been given two ears but a single mouth, in order that we may hear more and speak less.” Decide that the other person is someone worth listening to and give him or her your full concentration.

Imagine a spotlight shining on the speaker. If you are doing something else that could distract you, stop. Instead of working at your desk, for example, consider getting up and moving to another location, in or outside your office, to help you focus on the speaker. If necessary, instruct others to not interrupt your time with this person.

Obviously, there are situations when you can't pay attention properly: When you are in the middle of something else, rushing out the door, in pain, in the shower, or otherwise engaged. To allow yourself to pay attention, choose a time and place when you are reasonably free of distraction. Sometimes you will be better off postponing an important conversation than dividing your concentration and risking misunderstanding. In this case, consider saying: “In order to give you my undivided attention, can we talk later?”

Paying attention also means refraining from interrupting. Let the speaker finish! Then pause to reflect. Interrupting or finishing the speaker's sentences will only cause frustration and distraction. Remind yourself that you will get your turn to talk. The other person is much more likely to listen to you if you've listened to him or her. When you feel the impulse to interrupt, just notice what you're feeling and file it in your mind for later. In short, paying attention means putting yourself in “receive” mode and keeping yourself there long enough to hear the other person out. If you do, even the most confusing people start to make sense.

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Consider Tamara, who is discussing her problems with computer crashes with her colleague Kelly:

*Tamara: My computer is really giving me grief. It keeps crashing on me.*

*Kelly: Tell me what's happening.*

*Tamara: It just crashes all the time. (Kelly remains attentive but silent.) I don't know what's going on. I think my computer and I weren't meant for each other! What should I do?*

*Kelly: Tell me more about it first.*

*Tamara: Well, it just freezes on me. Nothing moves. Maybe it's not a real crash, but I can't do any work on it right now. I've tried restarting the computer but I get the same result. I wonder if everything is connected right. (Tamara looks at her computer.) Oh my God, one of my connections is loose. I can't believe I didn't think about checking. (Tamara secures the connection.) I feel like an idiot, but thanks for listening. I probably would have gone through the whole day without discovering the problem.*

---

It's natural, of course, to find it hard to hang in there with people who are droners or ramblers. Unfortunately, some people "talk to think." They work out their thoughts by expressing everything that occurs to them. In such cases, don't get bogged down in the details. Focus on the broad picture of what they are saying but give them enough time to express themselves.

Finally, try to empty your mind as you listen attentively. Patricia Ann Ball, a former president of the National Speakers Association, tells the following story:

*When my daughter was a little girl, she made a brilliant statement that has stuck with me ever since. "What did you say, Mom? I didn't hear you. I had my own answer running!" She said that because I was chastising her. Be very careful when you are listening to someone that you are not listening with your "answer running." (Straight Talk Is More Than Words, p. 35.)*

### **Show Interest**

By showing interest in what people have to say, you get more information. That's because other people are more likely to communicate openly when you actively tune into them. For example, can you recall having a conversation with a person who kept looking around the room, or drumming his chair with a pencil? Or with someone who fixed you with a blank, expressionless stare and kept her arms crossed while you talked? How did you respond? Most people tend to respond to this kind of behavior by backing off or clamming up.

Individuals who are skilled at reading people make a point of connecting with them. They make comfortable, flexible eye contact, neither avoiding the speaker's gaze nor staring excessively. They send encouraging signals by facing the speaker and leaning forward, nodding and mirroring with their facial expressions what they are hearing. (Smiling is good, but not if the speaker is describing his mother's funeral.) Your actions are the most basic element of your communication. If your nonverbal signals fail to match your speech, others will sense that something is off and feel mistrustful or guarded.

Of course, you also show interest through your words. At the simplest level, you can offer encouragement by interjecting expressions such as "ah-ha," "I see," "go on," or "no kidding."

You can also acknowledge the other person's point of view, even if you don't completely agree with it. Acknowledging means considering the circumstances and recognizing the kernel of truth or good in what the speaker is trying to communicate. Imagine, for example, a child who is berated by her mother for being argumentative. The child then counters: "But you argue with Daddy a lot." Should the mother interpret this as a mere diversion? Or say something more like: "You're right. I do. Both of us should argue less!"

You can also encourage the speaker by *not* responding in ways that negate or reject, even if we do this with good intentions. Here are some examples of "pseudo-accepting" responses that fail to demonstrate respect and acceptance:

**Denying the validity of what the speaker feels or believes**—"Oh, you shouldn't feel that way!" "That's silly." "How can you think like that?" It's not that you can't disagree. At an appropriate point in the conversation you can share your own perspective. But when your goal is to listen and understand, you will not succeed by negating the speaker's point of view.

**Judging the speaker**—"That's horrible!" "I can't believe you did that!" Avoid rushing to judgment. Hear the person out. If there really are grounds for arrest, you can call the police later.

**Giving unsolicited advice**—"If I were you . . ." "Honey, you should dump the creep!" "Look, I've been there, and, believe me, you don't want to . . ." We do owe constructive feedback to people who ask us for it, but volunteering advice when someone may just want us to listen leaves the speaker feeling discounted. He or she may just give up.

When you want to show interest as a listener, try to hear what it is that the speaker wants to have recognized or appreciated. Convey understanding of its importance to him or her. Acknowledgment is an important way to build trust and encourage others to be more open with you.

### **Read Body Language**

Actions speak louder than words. It is estimated that only 7% of the impact we have on others comes from our word choices. The rest of the 93% is due to our body language and how we say what we say (tone of voice, speed of speech, volume). Also, our body language is mostly unconscious and possibly the most honest form of communication. Therefore, it's impossible to understand people without paying close attention to their body movements, facial expression, and vocal qualities.

There is a danger, however, in jumping to conclusions on the basis of a single behavior. When a person has folded arms, does it mean he or she feels threatened or merely skeptical? Does a person's silence mean anger? Or fear? Or a sense of awe? Does standing with hands in one's pockets mean a person is secretive or just critical? (Or has cold hands?)

Reading nonverbal signals correctly depends on noticing a cluster of behaviors. For example, when a person closes his eyes, folds his arms, and remains silent, chances are he is rejecting what you are saying! The following table provides a reasonable guide to reading a person's emotional state.

**Anxiety** fidgeting, hand wringing, shifting from side to side, blinking, high pitched voice, throat clearing

**Lack of interest** blank stare, doodling, looking around, monotone voice, tapping feet, drumming table

<b>Involvement</b>	leaning forward, open hands, moving to speaker's rhythm, direct eye contact, uncrossed legs, smile
<b>Anger</b>	redness of skin, loud voice, finger-pointing, steely eyes, legs/arms crossed, frown
<b>Reflection</b>	chin-stroking, nodding, index finger to lips, eyes glancing upward, glasses in mouth, ear turned toward speaker
<b>Secretiveness</b>	nose-touching, sideways glance, squint, covering mouth, smirk, low volume, mumbling
<b>Disdain</b>	hands on hip, hands behind neck, staccato voice, leg over chair, feet on desk, fingers hooked in belt

Variations from an individual's usual body language may be signals that something out of the ordinary is going on. Sudden changes in body language may indicate that an individual has been caught off guard—lying, for example. A vocal change, such as more rapid speech or a higher pitch, breaking eye contact, nervous gestures, or covering one's eyes or mouth can be telltale signs of dissembling. It is also important to notice when people rely on conversational ploys to control or direct interaction. When people avoid giving a reasonable response, answer curtly, change the subject, go off on tangents, or answer with a question, there's often something he or she is trying to conceal or evade.

Although it's important to avoid making pat judgments about people based on observations of their body language, persistent trends do reflect personality traits. Dramatic variations from the norm can alert you to stress or changes that may be affecting people. Your observations of others can contribute to your understanding of them.

## 2. Clarifying Meaning

The deeper level of understanding is recognizing the significance of what the other person tells us—the meaning behind the words. To understand others is to go beyond “just the facts, ma’am,” asking yourself: “How must he feel?” “What does this mean to her?” When you want a deeper understanding of someone, use these three key techniques: *ask open-ended questions*, *paraphrase*, and *respond to feelings*.

### Ask Open-ended Questions

It’s fairly obvious that you can learn more about what someone means by asking questions. When you ask questions, you also succeed in showing your interest in what the other person is saying. There are different categories of questions: direct and open-ended questions can be useful tools for clarifying meaning, while leading questions can impede good communication.

Direct questions are those that require a simple factual response. “Did you like the movie?” “How late did you work last night?” “Is Lee okay?” “Would you rather have chicken or fish for dinner?” “Who do you think will get the promotion?” These are all examples of direct questions. They tend to be straightforward, and we can use them when you want specific information. Because their scope is precise, direct questions don’t usually invite much elaboration from the speaker. Since they are usually “low demand,” in this respect, direct questions are usually a nonthreatening way to request clarification, especially from someone who is shy or anxious. (An exception to this would be, “Do you care about me or not?”)

Open-ended questions invite the speaker to expand or elaborate on her message. They offer more leeway to respond and share.

“What was the upsetting part for you about what he said?” “How do you foresee things getting better on the job?” “Why do you think Emilio was so quiet at dinner?” Use open-ended questions to encourage others to “open up” and share thoughts, feelings, and opinions. By doing so, you increase your chances of learning what’s really important to them.

Leading questions, in contrast, are really statements masquerading as questions. “Don’t you think he was tacky to say that?” “Are you really going to wear that dress?” “Why didn’t you call first?” Like judging, denying, or giving unsolicited advice, asking leading questions puts others on the defensive. Rather than clarifying, they sidetrack communication. Many questions that start with a negative (“didn’t he,” “aren’t you,” “can’t you”) are leading questions.

### **Paraphrase**

When you paraphrase, you reflect back to the speaker what you have heard. Do this by restating his or her message, accurately and succinctly, in your own words. Paraphrasing helps clarify meaning in two important ways. First, by offering the speaker your version of what you’ve heard, you test your understanding. If you’ve misconstrued, you give the speaker the opportunity to restate and correct the message. If you got it right, you’ll get confirmation. Second, a paraphrase demonstrates your attention and interest, thus “rewarding” the speaker and encouraging further sharing, and at a deeper level. This maximizes your chances of learning what’s really on his or her mind.

People sometimes reject the notion of paraphrasing, usually because they have had negative experiences with it. Paraphrasing is not effective if it turns into parroting:



*Lou: Man, she made me so mad!*

*Sam: So, like, she really made you mad.*

Duh! Instead, use your own words:

*Lou: Man, she made me so mad!*

*Sam: She really ticked you off.*

People also get turned off by overuse of trite formats for paraphrasing, such as “So, what I hear you saying is . . .” Avoid rote formulas. Just stating your own translation of the other person’s message will be more immediate and genuine. The following exchange took place between Suzanne Gallo, a manager, and one of her employees, David Johnson, who was being “called on the carpet.”

*Gallo: Come in, David. Have a seat. I suppose you’re wondering why I want to talk to you.*

*Johnson: Yes, I guess I am.*

*Gallo: Well, David, recently something has come up that I want to know your feelings about. Remember the Adamson report?*

*Johnson: What about it?*

*Gallo: To be frank with you, there was a lot of disagreement on the figures that were used, and the boss wants the whole thing done over. It wasn’t up to the level of the reports you’ve been turning out in the past. I have to admit that myself. But I want to hear your views about it.*

*Johnson: Well, there isn’t much to say. I sort of figured it would get rejected anyway. I wasn’t happy about the damn thing either. (Getting a little emotional.)*

*Gallo: You weren't pleased with it either?*

*Johnson: No, I wasn't. Look, it takes about 25 to 30 hours, at least, for me to write up a report like that even when I've already worked up the figures! You know how long I spent on that report? About 5 hours! And I wasn't as sure on the figures as I should have been either.*

*Gallo: You didn't get to put in much time on the report, is that it?*

*Johnson: No, I didn't. In fact, I don't blame them for rejecting it at all. Like I said, it was a lousy job. But it won't be the last lousy job they get from me unless I get some help down here. There's no way I can run a research department and do the odds and ends that get sent in my direction. When we were a smaller outfit, it was possible, but not now.*

*Gallo: You're saying that you have too many assignments then?*

*Johnson: Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying! (Getting more upset.) I'm expected to do everybody's odds and ends. Production wants this, marketing wants that, cost accounting wants something else. Then along comes the Control Committee and their report. They give me a week's notice to get it out. I know I'm running a staff department, but there's no way one person can handle it all.*

Paraphrasing may feel awkward at first and takes some practice to do smoothly and skillfully. When you succeed in concisely restating the core of the speaker's message, you'll probably know it. People usually respond to an effective paraphrase by saying "exactly!" or words to that effect, letting you know that you've grasped the meaning of what they've said.

this material has been excerpted from

***PeopleSmart:  
Developing Your Interpersonal Intelligence***

by Mel Silberman, Ph.D. and Freda Hansburg, Ph.D.

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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