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Communication Competence in Interpersonal Interactions

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Abstract

Is communicating well with others an art or a science? Is it a myth or a reality? What is the secret of good communication? Good communication requires effort. Individuals who desire to improve their communication skills must work hard to enhance their communication skills. It requires patience, effort, consistency, and dedication. Many would like to believe that communication skills are easy to gain without much effort. In reality, it is not true. To achieve communicative competence, one must practice every day. To improve one's speaking skills in English, one must practice speaking in English every day. Competence in interpersonal interactions requires that we are appropriate and effective in all our interactions. Being ethical in our interactions is another dimension of communication competence in our interpersonal interactions. What constitutes communication competence? Is it effectiveness alone? Is it appropriateness alone? Is it ethics alone? In this article, it is argued that individuals must work hard to be appropriate, effective, and ethical in their communication interactions with others.

Keywords: Communication, competence, knowledge, motivation, skill

Introduction

What constitutes good communication? How should one develop good communication skills? How should people display and be known as competent communicators? This has befuddled the author of this article. He has always wondered why things go awfully wrong between or among people. Suppose two people have good command in English in terms of fluency and sentence construction. Fluency and sentence construction do not constitute good communication. Individuals may have fluency but may not have the required interpersonal sense or interpersonal responsibility to communicate well. Communicating well requires a lot of personal responsibility. We cannot communicate mindlessly. Many times we see that people communicate irresponsibly without being mindful of what others think and feel. Such types of people are too assertive and do not worry what others will think about what they are saying. All that matters is their feelings and opinions. This is a highly unethical proposition. One cannot communicate as he/she likes. There should be a sense of care and responsibility while communicating with others.

The moot question is why people communicate irresponsibly? There could be multiple reasons. Some of them could be as follows:

1. The person does not recognize what is required to communicate well.
2. The person does not care what will happen if he/she communicates as he/she likes.
3. The person knows that he/she should communicate responsibly but does not have the required 'skill'.

So, we can understand from the above reasons that people do not communicate well for multiple reasons-lack of awareness of what to communicate, lack of regard for the other person, lack of skill in communicating.

Competent communication requires that if we wish to communicate well we should have the requisite skills-empathy, role taking, sensitivity, asking questions properly.

The lack of these skills can be seen both in students and faculty. The point that is being argued is that communicating well requires sensitivity, responsibility, empathy, and appropriateness.

While communicating with people one must take all the above factors into consideration. The truth is that communicating well requires that people are motivated to communicate well.

Motivation

Motivation is the first step in the process of communicating well. People who desire to improve their singing skills must practice every day. People who desire to improve their listening skills should listen to lots of information. People who plan to be excellent hockey players must have a desire to play, practice, and learn every day. It is motivation that drives people to be perfect in a domain that they wish to excel in. They should have interest. Only those who have the necessary motivation will obviously communicate with eagerness, zeal, and enthusiasm. Such people will find avenues and search for the requisite contexts and materials to enhance their skills.

The second reason why people communicate incompetently is due to lack of knowledge. Knowledge constitutes command in

sentence construction, vocabulary, grammar, rules of discourse, etc. They should know what to talk. They should have ideas to communicate. Sadly, motivation alone is not enough to communicate. One must know the script (Spitzberg 1982). By script is meant the lines of what to communicate. For example if one person asks, "How are you?", the other person cannot say, "How does it matter to you how I am?". This is highly inappropriate.

Read the following sentences:

John: How are you?

Mary: I am fine. Thank you. How are you?

What Mary is essentially doing is following the script. Competent communicators know the script of what to say and how to say what to say. Scripts are common in communication. We do not expect people to speak something we do not expect. For example, to a question, "How are you doing?", we expect answers like "I am doing well," "so, so", "just getting on". However we do not expect an answer like "shut up" to our question "how are you doing?". So, in all our interpersonal interactions, we expect some consistency, uniformity, and predictability in our conversations (Morreale, Spitzberg, and Barge, 2006). So, the first requirement of competent communication is where the scripts of the interactants are appropriate. Of course, in anger, while highly distracted, or highly emotional, we may not speak due to emotions ransacking our ability to think well. However, it must be kept in mind that the delivery of scripts must generally be predictable and not ambiguous, impulsive, and unpredictable.

Knowledge

The second criteria to ensure competent communication in our interpersonal communication is knowledge of the topics, good vocabulary, command in phrasal verbs, etc. Unless we know something about a topic, we can hardly speak. We must be well read. People who do not read well and extensively may not contribute to a conversation. So, command in vocabulary, sentence construction, and grammar are needed to communicate well. When we do not know anything about a topic, we will not be able to speak impressively. We just cut a sorry figure. So, competent interpersonal communicators should be well-read. So, a desire to communicate is good. But beyond that, knowledge of what to communicate is even more important. According to Brian Spitzberg, knowledge of the topic, vocabulary, and good sentence construction go a long way in helping a person communicate well (Spitzberg 2000).

Consistent Practice

The third criteria to be taken into consideration as far as our ability to communicate appropriately and effectively is the need to have the requisite skills. Skills can be gained only with practice. Unless we practice the skills of listening, empathy, role taking, attentiveness, and perceptiveness, we cannot be competent in our communication with others. A skill should be goal-directed. It should result in some action being taken. It should be demonstrated. People cannot say they are competent communicators. They must exhibit these skills to communicate skillfully. What skills are required? Supportive stance, empathy, listening non-judgmentally, speaking with clarity are some of the skills required to speak competently.

Non-judgmental Attitude

One of the most important qualities of competent communication is being non-judgmental in our interactions. It is human nature to criticize others at the drop of a hat. Some people have the habit of criticizing others for no reason. They do not even bother how much others can be hurt due to this attitude. Competent people take care not to hurt others. They give feedback in a gentle and in a non-defensive manner. Non-defensiveness engenders more cooperation. For our interpersonal interactions to be smooth and not awkward, we must ensure that we are not defensive in our interactions. Defensiveness leads to defensiveness. This is detrimental to interpersonal relationships in family or organisational life. We must never rush to judge others or their character or their personality. What we see is just our perception, and nothing but that. If we still want to say something, we can give feedback to others in a manner that does not provoke others or make others irritable or defensive.

Manipulation

Utmost care has to be taken to avoid manipulation in our interactions. Manipulative behaviours hurt people as much as defensiveness. Manipulation means we are using people for our personal benefit and discarding them once our purpose is served. This is highly unethical. In organizations, we can see some colleagues who communicate only for the sake of getting some work done. The colleagues who are helping them do not even know that they are being used. They do all the work selflessly. However, once the work is done, the manipulative person discards them and even accuses them for something the person who helped him has never done. A series of accusations are made. Manipulative people indulge in blaming, accusing, and complaining all the time. This kind of selfish, manipulative behaviour is most detrimental to interpersonal communication competence. This kind of communicative behaviour is the antithesis of good communication. The author of this article was told by some colleagues that the greatest threat to communication competence is manipulation. They asserted that more than technical knowledge, it is ethical competence that is required. What is ethical communication competence? It is the ability not to be manipulative! Hence, in all our interpersonal relationships, we must take care to ensure that we are not manipulative in nature. It is easy to manipulate people once or twice, but sooner or later, people will come to know our manipulative nature and detect our incompetent behavior. So, whoever wants to be competent must not be manipulative in nature in his/her interpersonal interactions with others.

Supportiveness

One of the most important qualities human beings should possess is the skill of supportiveness. What human beings expect from one another is emotional support more than financial support. Competent people are supportive of others at every juncture. They listen well, empathize, paraphrase, and show a lot of patience. They do not judge others or rush to give advice. So, supportive communication skills are one of the most important skills that human beings require in their lives. The tragedy is that many of us are not supportive of others. We ridicule them, make fun of their predicament, or become malevolent. Supportiveness means we help others to wade through their various crises in their lives, offer our time and resources. We do not rush to judge them. We must not rush to offer advice. The greatest supportive communication is when we listen to others patiently. When we find

supportive people around us, we can overcome many crises in our lives. We get the confidence to overcome our problems. In fact, when we have supportive people around us, we do not feel lonely or isolated. This is the greatest form of interpersonal communication. Communicatively competent people offer support to others in manifold ways. Today, in organizations, we see a lot of unsupportive people around us. People do not have time to listen to us. They do not have time to understand us. Life in today's society has become so busy and complex that we have become egocentric and selfish. Supportiveness in human relations is totally missing. It is a shame that society today is obsessed with money, wealth, and gaining material goods, and display materialism.

However, the most important thing in interpersonal relationships is the degree of supportiveness we can find in people around us. The desire to hurt, shame, and humiliate others is increasing in society. We need more supportive colleagues, subordinates, and superiors at the workplace. In the family too, we need people who can understand us and are supportive of us. This skill of supportiveness must be taught to both students and faculty. In the absence of a supportive environment, people may become depressed, nervous, confused, helpless, and clueless. The power of supportiveness cannot be underestimated. In friendships too, it is most important to have people who are supportive of us. Hence, it must be realized that in interpersonal communication, the degree of supportiveness is one of the most important skills we all require to be considered as ethical human beings.

Conclusions

Human relations, today, have become very complex. People are displaying a lot of incompetence as they lack empathy, supportiveness. They are highly judgemental of others. They are oblivious of the fact that being judgemental of others is wrong. The need of the hour today in our society is good interpersonal communication competence. Communication competence is a function of motivation, knowledge, skill, supportiveness, empathy, and helping nature. These are the primordial qualities that define us as human beings. The importance of these skills must be taught to everyone. Without the qualities of empathy, supportiveness, listening, patience, kindness, we become corrosive and thick skinned human beings. Truly competent people display empathy, cooperation, kindness, and supportiveness. It is not too late any time to learn the skills of interpersonal communication competence and become competent and responsible communicators in organisations.

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