



NLS Department

Tutorial N°3 – Interpersonal relationships¹

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal communication can be defined as communication between two people, but the definition fails to capture the essence of a relationship. This broad definition is useful when we compare it to intrapersonal communication, or communication with ourselves, as opposed to mass communication, or communication with a large audience, but it requires clarification. The developmental view of interpersonal communication places emphasis on the relationship rather than the size of the audience, and draws a distinction between impersonal and personal interactions.

For example, one day your coworker and best friend, Iris, whom you've come to know on a personal as well as a professional level, gets promoted to the position of manager. She didn't tell you ahead of time because it wasn't certain, and she didn't know how to bring up the possible change of roles. Your relationship with Iris will change as your roles transform. Her perspective will change, and so will yours. You may stay friends, or she may not have as much time as she once did. Over time, you and Iris gradually grow apart, spending less time together. You eventually lose touch. What is the status of your relationship?

If you have ever had even a minor interpersonal transaction such as buying a cup of coffee from a clerk, you know that some people can be personable, but does that mean you've developed a relationship within the transaction process? For many people the transaction is an impersonal experience, however pleasant. What is the difference between the brief interaction of a transaction and the interactions you periodically have with your colleague, Iris, who is now your manager?

The developmental view places an emphasis on the prior history, but also focuses on the level of familiarity and trust. Over time and with increased frequency we form bonds or relationships with people, and if time and frequency are diminished, we lose that familiarity. The relationship with the clerk may be impersonal, but so can the relationship with the manager after time has passed and the familiarity is lost. From a developmental view, interpersonal communication can exist across this range of experience and interaction.

[...] Interpersonal relationships take time and effort to form, and they can be challenging. All relationships are dynamic, meaning that they transform and adapt to changes within the context and environment. They require effort and sacrifice, and at times, give rise to the question, why bother? A short answer may be that we, as humans, are compelled to form bonds. But it still fails to answer the question, why?

Uncertainty theory states that we choose to know more about others with whom we have interactions in order to reduce or resolve the anxiety associated with the unknown (Berger, C. and Calabrese, R., 1975; Berger, C., 1986; Gudykunst, W., 1995). The more we know about others, and become accustomed to how they communicate, the better we can predict how they will interact with us in future contexts. If you learn that Monday mornings are never a good time for your supervisor, you quickly learn to schedule meetings later in the week. The predicted outcome value theory asserts that not only do we want to reduce uncertainty, we also want to maximize our possible benefit from the association (Sunnafrank, M., 1986; Sunnafrank, M., 1990; Kellerman, K and

¹ Business communication success, 2015, University of Minnesota libraries publishing.

50 Reynolds, R., 1990). This theory would predict that you would choose Tuesday or later for a
51 meeting in order to maximize the potential for positive interaction and any possible rewards that
52 may result. One theory involves the avoidance of fear while the other focuses on the pursuit of
53 reward. Together, they provide a point of reference as we continue our discussion on interpersonal
54 relationships.

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56 Regardless of whether we focus on collaboration or competition, we can see that interpersonal
57 communication is necessary in the business environment. We want to know our place and role
58 within the organization, accurately predict those within our proximity, and create a sense of safety
59 and belonging. Family for many is the first experience in interpersonal relationships, but as we
60 develop professionally, our relationships at work may take on many of the attributes we associate
61 with family communication. We look to each other with similar sibling rivalries, competition for
62 attention and resources, and support. The workplace and our peers can become as close, or closer,
63 than our birth families, with similar challenges and rewards.

Key Takeaways

- Interpersonal relationships are an important part of the work environment.
- We come to know one another gradually.
- Self-disclosure involves risk and reward, and is a normal part of communication.

References

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Part I: Comprehensive text

In the class....

Part II: Working groups

1. Write down five terms that describe your personal self, and five terms that describe your professional self. Compare your results with a classmate.
2. Think of someone you trust and who trusts you. How did you come to have a mutually trusting relationship? Did it take effort on both people's part? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
3. How important do you think self-disclosure is in business settings? Give some examples. Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
4. Find in the references which are articles?